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The Brockenspectre

Volumes 1 & 2

Volume 2

The novel as site of transcendental homelessness.

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Abstract

The novel as site of transcendental homelessness.

In *The Theory of the Novel* Lukács suggests the novel is, above all others, the form which expresses ‘transcendental homelessness’. That is, it articulates the novelist’s longing for a spiritual and emotional home no longer available in a world without a deity.

Through consideration of post-modern theory and the attributes of belief as it relates to fiction; through exploration of my own practice in writing *The Brockenspectre* and through critique of three novels: proto-modern – Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*; modernist – Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; and post-modern – Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*; the essays of this thesis will examine the fundamental nature of the novelist’s exile, and the way he or she inhabits the text in order to regain the paradise lost. For despite the deconstruction of concepts such as centre and author, it is posited that the idea of the novel as the site, the location, of transcendental homelessness offers the possibility of momentarily regaining the Eden from which the author has been ejected.

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1. Introduction: The novel as site of transcendental homelessness

The title of this thesis derives from an idea I first discovered in Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller', and subsequently in Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* (1920). The idea is suggestive. Namely, that the novel expresses the transcendental homelessness which arises following the loss of the transcendent – God – whether that 'god' was the accepted values of Hellenic society as understood by 19th century German Idealism or the Christian God, for European humanity the unquestioned centre of the world until after, it is posited, the time of Dante. In so far as this centralising 'god', conceived either in religious terms, or in those of a Western tradition of philosophy and linguistics, is now judged non-existent, or illogical – not merely absent – it seems impossible to maintain that the novel can express the loss of any transcendent deity.

However the suggestion of the novel being the site of an expression of homelessness is a fertile one. There is a sense in which in her writing the novelist attempts not only to re-create an intellectual and emotional home, because the security of 'god' has disappeared, but the very nature of the novel does not allow her that security. This thesis explores the notion of transcendental homelessness being not only fundamental to, and expressed by, the novel, but proposes that it is in the novel as a site that a search for the home now lost takes place, and the transcendent is, momentarily, attained.

2. Constructing a novel: *bricolage* and biography

No novelist writes out of a void. *The Brockenspectre* grew out of an actual situation, but what informs the writing is what I have experienced and what I have learnt of the craft as a writer. My upbringing has taught me to regard the notion of a single, stable home with disbelief. The result, an antipathy, which amounts almost to an inability, to locating myself securely in any one setting has influenced my writing practice. What I thought was a technique born out of desperation – that I was a *bricoleuse* – turned out to be the result of a childhood created by *bricolage*, one ideally suited to creating and expressing the homelessness of which I treat in *The Brockenspectre*, perceive to be at the basis of life itself and view as a fundamental characteristic of the novel.

Having been born and spent most of the first thirteen years of my life abroad, it wasn't so much that I was an exile in England, as that I saw through different eyes from those who grew up in this country. Everyone sees through different eyes and we all risk solipsism, but certain understandings my friends and family share are simply not mine. Or they are both mine and not mine. To give one example. My school playground was hard dusty earth surrounded by gum trees – at least my school playgrounds in South America and Africa were. The playground of the primary school which I attended occasionally in the summer months was tarmac, surrounded by oak trees. In England at playtime I drank tinny milk out of bottles with a straw, ate school dinners and had a rest afterwards. In Argentina, I saluted the flag and took the oath of allegiance in the morning in Spanish, went home for lunch, and was taught in English, without flag or oath, in the afternoon.

Children adapt. In a memoir of my childhood I wrote that our English head teacher said that my brother and I were the most stable of her summer swallows, of whom she had a number – children who arrived half way through April and left half way through September.¹ If that is the case then my parents must have felt they had achieved a miracle, because although we resided both abroad and at home we were not fully a part of either home, village life – my father didn't live in England for forty years – nor, worse, were we fully part of the 'ex-pat' community. Neither diplomat or military in Africa, nor diplomat or business in South America, my father, with an expert command of the languages, at ease with his Uruguayan, Argentinian, Sudanese, Italian and Syrian colleagues, by inclination and circumstance placed himself, and his family, outside the expatriate 'pale'.

¹ *Swallows* MA Contemporary Literature in English, Lancaster University, 1992, unpublished. Appendix 1.

By the time I was fourteen I had lived in seven different countries, mixed with a minimum of nine different nationalities, and attended nine different schools (with one more to go). Instead of my upbringing being a synthesis of England and abroad, making me a citizen of the world, it was more a collection of oddments of landscape – foreign, native, familial, educational – out of which I created my several selves and lives and homes, an experience which made me less a hybrid more a *bricolage*.

How does constructing myself by *bricolage* relate to *The Brockenspectre*? At the start of writing I had the basic plot, the two main characters, and knew the denouement, but what story could I concoct from these ingredients? I began to piece together a novel from my autobiography, from an already existing short story, from ideas that came to me, events that I was involved with, and other people's writing. When I read Derrida's discussion of Lévi-Strauss' use of the term *bricolage* to explain the way a grand myth, or over-arching narrative, is constructed, the description of something being patched together from already extant fragments of story seemed to accord with the somewhat errant process of constructing my novel. In a later encounter with Umberto Eco writing on how the Middle Ages, after the destruction of the Roman Empire 'preserved [...] the heritage of the past [...] through a constant retranslation and reuse; it was an immense work of *bricolage* balanced among nostalgia, hope and despair.' (Eco 1987:84) I recognised that my construction mirrored the fragmentary nature of my early life and confirmed my feeling that *bricolage* might reconstruct a coherent world out of the fragments of the past of an inhabitant of nowhere and everywhere.

The novel was finished, was edited, and re-edited. I acquired a new laptop and transferred my files. Imagine my surprise during the re-re-edit when, in a search for the word 'Argentina', I came across a file called *In Communicado* from two computers back, that I had forgotten I had written, that didn't show up in the documents, nor in my back-up disc, and which describes *bricolage*, though I don't use the term, as my initial practice in writing my first novel.²

Now, to write one novel by this method could be called naive. Does writing two indicate that I am not a novelist, that I am simply a story teller – a teller of stories – which is what I announce I want to be in *In Communicado*?

² *In Communicado*, MA Creative Writing, Manchester Metropolitan University, Text Module Genesis Document, 2006, unpublished. Appendix 2.

In the first novel, when I came to a halt, I stopped using *bricolage*. Instead, I started writing chapter synopses and rigorously plotted the remainder of the book. Although I maintain that I remained interested in *Jemillia* after I knew exactly what was going to happen, I enjoyed the putting-together-out-of-bits-and-pieces, being the *bricoleuse*, of *The Brockenspectre* far more, because it was a kind of discovery.³ Attaching the word *bricolage* to my technique may have been whistling in the dark in order to assert my credibility, but Kelton Cobb's interpretation of Hebdige's re-use of the theory seemed relevant and usable: 'For Hebdige, the improvisations [*bricolage*] found in [cultural] style are precisely this sort of activity [...] incorporating [each thing and investing it with] the ever-evolving scheme of meaning with which they interpret the world.' (Cobb 2005:59) In despite of Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss, and its implications for the novelist, substitute stories, biographies, incidents, for 'thing', and the method, initially adopted pragmatically, acquired validity.⁴ Moreover when I came across *In Communicado*, the fictional transcript of a fictional interview with me as the author, I was intrigued to see that I claimed my second novel was going to be about a young man travelling from England to be a gaucho in or near Patagonia. In fact it isn't about the young man I envisaged, though such a young man plays a significant role in both advancing the plot and as part of the theme of *The Brockenspectre*, but the interview reveals that the South America of my childhood, which acts as a resource for the novel, was already a train of thought. So, under my method lay a subterranean preoccupation born from the early experience of being an expatriate.

In *Réponses* Barthes says 'any biography is a novel that dare not speak its name.' (Barthes 1971:89), which refers to the way a writer of biography, and, I would say, autobiography, is forced by the nature of the genre to bend the material to her will, thereby fictionalising her subject, whether that subject is herself or someone else. This made me wonder what would happen if I inverted the aphorism, in the way that a right-angled mirror reverses your image and shows you what people really see when they look at you. While Barthes's comment is intended to reverse the common view of the novel as a biography it is still

³ *Jemillia*, 2006, unpublished.

⁴ What interests Derrida in Lévi-Strauss' thesis is that the method, the piecing together of myth, story, and the norms inhering in them, deconstructs the concept of the grand myth, the grand narrative, from within, precisely because *bricolage* admits of no 'centring' guiding principle. If Derrida is right, then writing a novel by *bricolage* should conceptually not be possible, as the novelist has to be in a sense the 'centring' guiding principle. Or does she? Can a novel be created out of oddments of writing placed side by side on the page without any selection or editing? With a herculean effort at self-effacement on the part of the *bricoleuse* it's possible, though such a work would seem to depend *entirely* on the reader for its sense – which to some extent is how Barthes sees Robbe-Grillet's fiction operating. (Culler 2002: 42-46)

worth asking who the novel is the biography of – the heroine, the reader or the writer – and considering the nature of the relation between the three.

Like *bricolage*, the idea of the novel being at base a biography, was productive. As well as the snippets of life histories of a number of men and women I knew, I was also, dangerously, because it nearly unbalanced the novel and tipped it into memoir, using my life story as source material for principally one, but in fact both, the main female characters. Yet I was not writing autobiography. Once the events and places were assigned to Miriam and Hild, the story belonged to those characters as much as to me. In fact their back stories, created out of my life, are now so much more vivid to me than my memories that they no longer seem my own. However, if the concept of the novel as biography is not to be regarded as a cliché decried from its association with the fallen-into-disrepute mode of biographical criticism, it needs teasing out.

Originating in Lukács's theory, Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller' (Benjamin 1999) makes a distinction between the oral story and the novel.⁵ By contrast with the 'reminiscences' of the storyteller, the goddess Mnemosyne, source of all fiction, the Muse invoked by the epic poet, is for the novelist the matrix of 'perpetuating remembrance'. While story-telling is communal, for the listener is in the company of the teller, novel reading is solitary. As a consequence of this solitude the novel reader, rather than savouring a well-known and loved tale, ingesting over time the 'moral' it embodies, 'devours' the novel: 'he swallows up the material as the fire devours logs in the fireplace. The suspense [is] very much like the draft which stimulates the flame...'. (Benjamin 1999:99) What he or she is devouring is the meaning of life expressed through the novelist's effort to capture, in the time of the novel, the remembered life of the protagonist. Benjamin quotes Lukács:

"Only in the novel are meaning and life [...] the essential and the temporal, separated; one can almost say that the whole inner action of a novel is nothing else but a struggle against the power of time [...] Only in the novel ... does there occur a creative memory which transfixes the object and transforms it [...] the insight which grasps this unity becomes the divinatory-intuitive grasping of the unattained and therefore inexpressible meaning of life'. (Benjamin 1999:98)

⁵ David H. Miles article on Lukács as a 'Young Hegelian' (Miles 1979) seeks to demonstrate how closely Benjamin's argument follows *The Theory of the Novel*. It should be noted that Benjamin is referring to the oral, not the short, story.

According to Lukács where an epic begins and ends is immaterial as the epic exists in the infinity of its society's values. Because the novel involves a journey towards some kind of enlightenment, its beginning and ending are crucial. Therefore a novel is an artefact necessarily within, and about, time. For, if in the world the meaning of a person's life is only fully comprehended at their death, so in fiction the reader can only derive 'the meaning of life' of the heroine if she knows 'in advance' that she will, 'share in their experience of death: if need be their figurative death – the end of the novel – but preferably their actual one.'⁶ (Benjamin1999:100) Although time and death are not exclusive to the novel, Lukács' point is that the epic is timeless while the tragic hero's death, which comprises tragedy's intensity, is contained within the time of the play. Both are related to the time of the real world but it's only in the novel that there is, has to be, an attempt to capture time and give meaning to life because the security of living within the 'essence' has been lost: 'Only in the novel, whose very matter is seeking and failing to find the essence, is time posited together with the form'. (Lukács1971:122) The biography of the protagonist is therefore imperative in the novel. This appears to be the case even where the protagonist – (or, as in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Repetition*, protagonists) – is absented as far as possible from being a character, or where a life is portrayed as much through the backdrop of the landscape and the time in which it is lived, as it is in the events (for example, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by Willa Cather).⁷ More, the biography, perforce, is the novel: 'The novel overcomes its 'bad' infinity [the disparate and unrestricted nature of the material] by recourse to the biographical form.' (Lukács1971:81) because only through the life story of the hero or heroine can the absence of Lukács' 'totality', a wholeness of life and meaning, be expressed and, I claim, transcendently, overcome.

Setting aside for the moment Derrida's objection, if we accept Lévi-Strauss' thesis that grand myths are created by *bricolage*, then what links *bricolage* and biography is the meaning that lies at the heart of myth and the search for meaning which is at the heart of the novel's process and which, in Lukács' view, constitutes its form.

⁶ It's also worth noting that when Lukács wrote his essay (1914-1915) he may not have been aware of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Swann's Way* was first published in 1913).

⁷ Cather's novel, an experiment in trying to write without conferring major significance on the events of the Archbishop's life, is an example of how the narration of the mundane events in the passage of time gives meaning to the landscape, and to the Archbishop's devotion to his duty and to God.

2. 1 ‘... the novel form is, like no other, an expression of this transcendental homelessness.’ (Lukács 1971:41)

In *The Empire Writes Back* Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin identify linguistic homelessness as the defining feature of the fiction of the margins, the colonial and post colonial peripheries, the fiction of the outsider and the exile. The resultant ‘[...] alienation of vision and [...] crisis in self-image’ (Ashcroft et al. 1989:9) issues in the construction of ‘place’ – linguistic place – as a way of writing back to the European centre that has marginalised the writer. Parallel to considering the nature of biography, my use of autobiography and my own practice in relation to the novel, I had been pondering the way certain novelists seemed, by force of their circumstances to be forever working through their exile in their novels.⁸ I was considering Conrad and Nabokov in particular, though Conrad, in his memoir, celebrates overcoming his exile, and Nabokov, in his autobiography and interviews, gainsays his.⁹

I became curious as to how this exile revealed itself in their work, and why the same feeling of exilic quest seems to pervade the novels of other writers in whom it appears to be expressly denied. I was thinking here of Hawthorne in *The House of Seven Gables*, coming home to the happy ending his wife so much desired and enjoyed, rather than Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*. There, the character Hester, embodying a freedom of thought and love which makes her outcast not only physically from her society but from its beliefs, seems to me to be precisely an exploration of the idea of exile with the novelist groping towards an Eden only achievable in his fiction. I was also thinking of Jane Austen’s parodic novel *Northanger Abbey*, in which she ridicules her heroine’s foray into the wild woods of Gothic fantasy before bringing her home to the conventional world not only of marriage, but marriage to a vicar. I began to wonder if all novelists were exiles, of itself not an uncommon position, because of the nature of the novel itself.

Consequently, when I came across the sentence, ‘The novel is the form of transcendental homelessness’, ascribed to Georg Lukács, in Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations*, it seemed to have a particular resonance with my approach to the construction of the novel by *bricolage* and my growing conviction of the homelessness of protagonist and novelist alike.

⁸ This working through also seems to apply to such novelists as Jean Rhys, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, all of them separated not just from their actual homes (the West Indies, England, Scotland) but their spiritual and emotional homes and seeking new ones in Catholicism and a new life in Europe.

⁹ However readers beware. According to Edward Said, Conrad’s autobiographical pronouncements show a ‘combination of evasion with seemingly artless candor’. (Said 1966 :11)

Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* is not now much favoured, although at the time it was first published (as an essay in 1916 and as a book in 1920) it was influential, and it aroused considerable interest and commentary when translated into English in 1971.¹⁰ This is partly because Lukács himself disowned both its pessimism, born as it was out of the 1914-1918 war, and its utopian thrust. Later, Lukács' public discarding of modernism and his adoption of Marxism, coupled with the earlier work's outmoded historical-philosophical standpoint, made it increasingly suspect.¹¹ In addition, it is difficult to read, because Lukács' discussion is in the highly abstract language of idealism and conducted without recourse to much in the way of specific example.¹²

Why bother then with someone who people regard as a now out-of-date theorist? Some thirty years after Graham Good's comment, 'it would be a mistake to dismiss it as a *period piece* [...] its intellectual substance can make a valuable contribution to the current debate on the theory of the novel.' (Good 1973:175) indicates that this particular essay of Lukács' can still have significance for writers and critics alike.¹³ Nevertheless, I am aware of two major problems associated with using Lukács. The first is how increasingly unfashionable, not to say indefensible, the concept of any transcendental essence and centre has become in literary theory and criticism. The second is that I have transmuted the statement which comprises the title of this thesis, 'The novel as the site of transcendental homelessness', from the originals of both Lukács and Benjamin.

As this chapter's epigraph demonstrates, what Lukács says is: 'for the novel form is, like no other, an *expression* of this transcendental homelessness.' (Lukács 1971:41) Benjamin in his turn transmutes Lukács, saying that Lukács sees in the novel 'the *form* of transcendental homelessness' (Benjamin 1999:98).¹⁴ While it could be argued that Benjamin's statement doesn't materially alter that of Lukács', though I think it does, my own annexation and alteration is materially different and suggestive because what Lukács means by the novel expressing transcendental homelessness is perhaps best understood in the distinction he makes between the novel and its 'caricatural twin'. 'The novel has a

¹⁰ First published in Max Dessoir's journal of aesthetics it was read 'with approval' by Max Weber and Thomas Mann. Later approving commentators included Susan Sontag and George Steiner.

¹¹ In David Lodge's compendium, *20th Century Literary Criticism*, there is no mention of it in the introduction to the Lukács' work he reprints.

¹² David H. Miles refers to Lukács 'heavily teutonic, abstract style.' (Miles 1979:22), while Graham Good says its 'remote style' is one of its shortcomings. (Good 1973:175)

¹³ My emphasis.

¹⁴ My emphasises.

caricatural twin “the entertainment novel” which has the outward features of the novel ...’ (Lukács 1971:73) In contradistinction to the ‘caricatural twin’, Lukács argues that the true, the meaningful, novel arises when other art forms, such as epic and Greek tragedy, but particularly the epic, can no longer exist. That is, the novel is possible when art has had to ‘write off the closed and total forms which stem from a rounded totality of being’.

(Lukács 1971:17) ‘Being and destiny, adventure and accomplishment, life and essence, are then identical concepts,’ (where ‘essence’ means those values which create the meaning of life). (Lukács 1971:30)

We must not understand Lukács’ statement that the novel has a double, the entertainment novel, as describing ‘high’ or ‘low’ brow, but as describing an absolute difference derived from the nature and the structure of the novel itself. In Lukács’ view, the novel attempts to bridge the abyss between material life and the abstract ideals of the hero.¹⁵ As a result ‘the novel [...] appears as something in process of becoming. That is why, from the artistic view-point, the novel is the most hazardous genre’, and why it can be distinguished from the entertainment which is, ‘in essence [...] bound to nothing and based on nothing’, and ‘is entirely meaningless.’ (Lukács 1971:72-73) It is this liberation and distinction from a closed form of fiction, whether epic or entertainment, a fiction in which the values upon which it is based are either given and fixed, or as in the adventure story, are assumed without question and trivial, which identifies the novel.

While for Lukács the totality, the wholeness of physical and spiritual experience enjoyed by the ancient Greeks, *is* the transcendental home whose loss the novel expresses, Benjamin translates the expression of loss into a *mode* – the novel is the genre, above all others, of transcendental homelessness. My articulation goes one step further and claims for itself not only expression and genre but *locus*. Fundamental to the novel, unlike an entertainment, is this hazardous wandering, this search, engendered by the intellectual and spiritual homelessness of the protagonist or author. The fleeting moment of meaningfulness for the hero or heroine is the point at which the novel ceases to be a process, for author and reader alike, and offers the possibility of achieving the Edenic home.

¹⁵ Lukács contrasts what he calls the novel’s ‘abstract’ idealism with the epic’s ‘organic’ totality. Though the utopian society Lukács envisages within which the epic takes place may never have existed, the wholeness of its values are a given for both epic and drama. For the dramatist they act as the backdrop to the tragic hero’s understanding and remorse for his past actions. This ‘totality of being’, is not only present in the epic but constitutes its form.

Curiously, despite in all probability writing in response and counter to, *The Theory of the Novel*, Bakhtin endorses this aspect – the loss of centrality of value – of Lukács’ thought. In *The Dialogic Imagination* the concept of linguistic homelessness is recognized not merely as basic to the novel, but also as a matter of ideology: ‘The novel begins by presuming a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world, a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness, which no longer possesses a sacrosanct and unitary linguistic medium for containing ideological thought.’ (Bakhtin 1981:367)¹⁶ The idea that the novel can only take place within the context of a ruptured language and ideology is akin to the concept of the novel being constructed by *bricolage*, in which the elements of the narrative are both linguistically different – Miriam’s memoir, Hild’s writing, Francesca Farrington’s memos, the pieces ‘Barn’ and the ‘Seducer’, where the narrator-writer is writing for the Miriam-writer, the story ‘The Frog’s Princess’ where the Miriam-writer is writing for the narrator-writer – and intellectually disparate and homeless.

¹⁶ The parallels between Bakhtin’s and Lukács’ thought is striking, but, unlike Benjamin, Bakhtin does not admit Lukács as a source. However, a conversation between Bakhtin and S.G. Bocharov acknowledging the fact is cited in a footnote in Neubauer’s article. (Neubauer 1996)

2. 2 Death of the author and the loss of the centre

In his paper *Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences*, Jacques Derrida outlines how in structuralist theory the ‘function of [the] center [...] organize[s] and limit[s] the *play* of the structure....’ (Derrida 1988:109) He argues, however, that though the centre has always been thought of as ‘unique’, the pivot around which meaning accretes, it is in fact paradoxical to say that it is part of the ‘totality’, the whole, which makes up the structure. For, being at one and the same time within and outside the structure, it escapes the structurality it governs. This logical contradiction therefore removes the centre but ‘as soon as one seeks to demonstrate [...] that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word ‘sign’ itself – which is precisely what cannot be done.’ (Derrida 1988:111) Consequently, because we can only think within our metaphysical heritage, the idea of the centralising sign and its signified remains in place, though it is fatally compromised. Derrida locates this moment as the point when he realised that the centrality and transcendence of the grand narrative, being logically impossible, were therefore untenable.

Two years later Barthes, in similar fashion, attacks the type of literary criticism that explicates by reference to the author: ‘the image of literature [...] in contemporary culture is tyrannically centred on the author [...] *explanation* of the work is still sought in the person of the producer.’ (Barthes 1986: 50) In doing so he destroys the concept of the Author-God. He proposes that the writer, at the point of recounting, rather than speaking in the present as ‘I’, becomes lost to the text: ‘Writing is that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees [...] all identity is lost [for] once a fact has been *recounted* [...] the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.’ (Barthes 1986:49) Proclaiming the demise of the message-bearing central author, who, as aligned not with ‘Art’ but with the ‘Priesthood’ (Barthes 1986:289) of meaning is therefore a kind of dictator, Barthes replaces him with ‘the modern *scriptor* [who] is born *at the same time* as his text’. (Barthes 1986:52) The idea, or ideal, the writer and even the subject matter are no longer anterior to the writing. The reverse is also true: the text is born as it is written and is read. This means that those texts which make us work as readers – the *scriptible* (‘writerly’ or ‘writable’) – are or should be of greater significance to us than the familiar easiness of the *lisible* (‘readable’ or ‘readerly’) work (Gray 1992).

In 1969 Michel Foucault published his article *What is an Author?* Its starting point, and its ending, is a quote from Beckett, ““What does it matter who is speaking”, someone said, “what does it matter who is speaking.””(Foucault 1988:197) Having unpacked the author-function Foucault hypothesises a time when the function disappears and the author is once more rendered unimportant: it is the words that matter.¹⁷ In the meantime, once we acknowledge the author as a function (rather than the originator of a work) we are free to look at how the text operates, rather than seeking to know what it means. In fact, where once the author preceded his works, and was the central principle for the identity of the text, and an ‘indefinite source of significations’, now, paradoxically, ‘he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses’, and who ‘impedes the free decomposition, and recomposition of fiction.’ (Foucault 1988:209) He thereby reduces ‘the great danger with which fiction threatens our world’, (Foucault 1988:209) the threat of endless, proliferating meaning. Foucault goes further. The author does not merely filter and restrict meaning, but also kills himself in the process – ‘writing has become linked to sacrifice’ and in the writer’s effort at self-effacement it is ‘its author’s murderer’ – the situation with Flaubert, Proust and Kafka. The very way he writes ‘cancels out the signs of his particular individuality’. (Foucault 1988:198)

Derrida’s declaration of the loss of the transcendent and the centre, Barthes announcement of the death of the centralising author, Foucault’s desire to see literature returned to the anonymous authorial past, would seek to strike a mortal blow at the concept of the novel both as the site of transcendental homelessness, and necessarily and essentially, biographical. Yet, as Derrida points out: ‘even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.’ (Derrida 1988:109) Though the concept is ‘contradictorily coherent’, and ‘as always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of desire’, we cannot ‘unthink’ the centre. (Derrida 1988:109) That is to say, Western society having created this centre, whether the primacy of the external ‘signified’ is God, or language itself, it now wants it, and perhaps can never rid itself of it, even though logically it cannot exist. Similarly, Foucault maintains it would ‘be pure romanticism[...]to imagine a culture[...]in which fiction would be[...]at the disposal of everyone[...]without passing through[...]a necessary or constraining figure.’ (Foucault 1988:209) Merely repeating that the author is dead is not only inadequate but the resultant elevation of ‘writing [*écriture*].’ (Foucault 1988:199) achieves a re-sacralising and re-emphasis of the

¹⁷ Foucault argues that until the late 18th century scientific texts were authored but not fictive (epic, tragedy, comedy) ones, but I am uncertain as to the era he is referring to.

creativity of the text: 'Giving writing a primal status seems to be a way of retranslating, in transcendental terms, both the theological affirmation of its sacred character and the critical affirmation of its creative character.' (Foucault 1988:199) This is the very opposite of the post-modern impetus towards self effacement and anonymity. Even Barthes does not give us examples of authors who have managed their deaths, though he cites Camus as an example of a neutral author, Robbe-Grillet as a writer who tries to disrupt the tyranny of narration and in his essay on Proust he indicates how the author etiolates himself, 'blur(s) by an extreme subtilization the relation of the writer and his characters.' Likening this to Brechtian distancing, we see 'the Author diminishing like a figure at the far end of the literary stage' (Barthes 1986:51-52), and by writing about becoming a writer 'Marcel' can no longer be located in the Marcel Proust of the real world.

If Foucault wants to say: 'who cares who speaks', Barthes seems to say that the consequence of the annihilation of author-person is that it is the reader who speaks. Despite trying to avoid, as Culler suggests, the 'plenitude of meaning', (Culler 2002:45) the emphasis of any creation of meaningful text falls upon the reader, and 'the birth of the reader must be 'requited' by the death of the 'author'. (Barthes 1986:55) The dictionary definitions of 'requite' are many: to retaliate, to reward, to repay and to take the place of.¹⁸ All these meanings appear to be present in Barthes' essay. There is a sense in which Barthes' retaliation on those critics who have tried to explain the text by finding the Author in it has become an attack on the notion of the author itself. There is a sense in which the reader takes the place of the author in creating any one of the multiplicity of meanings of a text, now 'a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original.' (Barthes 1968: 1986: 53) All of these, but principally the senses of *reward* and *repay* are found in the pay off for the reader's 'making' the text: the writer's freedom. Freedom from the necessity of creating meaning, freedom, if one dares think it, to imagine. It seems that while the ideas released by post-modernism cannot be disregarded, they might be held in a creative tension with those of an earlier transcendental idealism.

¹⁸ These definitions are the same in both the English and French languages and are taken from *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* and *The Dictionary of the French Academy*.

2. 3 Transcendence, belief and imagination

James Wood, in his collection of essays *The Broken Estate*, says he is ‘attracted to writers who struggle’ with ‘the distinctions between literary belief and religious belief’, because the distinctions are important. (Wood 1999: xv) Though the non-existence of God is, for him, a given, it also poses a problem. Reality and truth, once found in religion, have to be found elsewhere, and he seeks them in literature. Whereas we the readers may not believe or need to believe in God, or God’s word, we may believe, or want to believe, in the words we find in novels. For according to Wood, God not only doesn’t exist, but literature labours against any belief that he does. What literature does is secularize: ‘despite its being a kind of magic it is actually the enemy of superstition, the slayer of religion, the scrutineer of falsity.’ (Wood 1999: xiv) However our belief in the words of novels is not actual belief. Citing Thomas Mann’s view that the artist, though very serious, is only ever playing a game of “new possibilities of expression” of the truth, Wood maintains that ‘Fiction [is] the game of not quite, is the place of not-quite-belief’. (Wood 1999: xv) Our belief is discretionary, is always ‘as if’.

I find it difficult to accept the distinction Wood wants to draw between literary and religious belief because it seems to me that though he is interested in the struggle between the two in the writers he examines, he replaces one belief by the other. I do not deny the importance he accords literary truth – what elsewhere, following Duns Scotus, he has called the ‘thisness’ of a piece of writing, ‘when a detail seems really true’ (Wood 2008:54) – but I want to say that along with its importance he seems to accord it the absolutism he wishes to deny in religion in my view which removes from the novel, if not from other forms of literature, its fundamental and exhilarating characteristic, being the site of homelessness.

At the same time I am unhappy about his concept of ‘belief ‘as if’’ which for Wood constitutes what ‘makes fiction so moving’: its ‘gentle *request* to believe’ (Wood 1999: xiv) because this seems to contradict his claims for the truth of literature. The last, and title essay, ‘The Broken Estate’, comprises in part a sermon delivered at Worcester College, Oxford. In it Wood argues for an atheism so profound that even ‘the false purpose [...] invented by man’ can be stripped away ‘to reveal the *actual* pointlessness.’ (Wood 1999:300) It is an atheism in direct opposition to the fundamentalism of his evangelical Christian upbringing, but if fundamentalist Christianity is wrong-headed, then, logically,

fundamentalist atheism is wrong-headed. I do not want to say the Bible is literally true, nor do I want to say novels are literally true, but when literality or complete pointlessness are the only alternatives it makes it difficult to accord either secular or religious texts any significance or meaning. Ultimately pointlessness is another manifestation of the de-centred post-modern position, and likewise poses a problem for the writer.

Wood is not the only person to seek to address the problem.¹⁹ In *The World and the Book* Gabriel Josipovici also explores the way in which reality and truth are experienced, written about and achieved. It is a journey as arduous as the one to rid oneself of belief in one's own immortality and God's reality. For, following upon God's demise come realist novels, spinning their magic – until the modern and post-modern eras – and providing the next lot of opium for the people: 'Reality has to be worked for, habit and the wiles of the imagination have to be overcome before it can even be glimpsed.' (Josipovici 1971: 301) I don't disagree that reality has to be worked for. It is only too easy to want to think of one's life as a story with a happy ending – we have all listened to the fairy stories – and my novel was based initially in part on the idea of a woman who, because of her reading, wanted her life to have meaning, that there was, if not a happy ending, at least pattern in between its beginning and its end.²⁰ Nor do I disagree with the value Josipovici places on the cold-douche reality effect of the self-reflexive, self-referential text. In fact I revel in it. What I do disagree with is what lies behind it: the idea that belief must be destroyed, for I think that belief and imagination, though they are distinct categories of thought or feeling, are inextricably, and paradoxically, linked, and if the one is to be destroyed, then so must the other.²¹ Nabokov offers a useful insight here:

'I would say that imagination is a form of memory [...] When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment [...] to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may want to use [...].' (Nabokov 1990:78)

Even if we don't mind talking about belief being destroyed, (taking with it imagination), we object to memory being destroyed and taking with *it*, imagination. In fact we can have

¹⁹ David Lodge finds ideas and tools which allow him to reassert the centrality of the author/writer in Bakhtin's critical work.

²⁰ If Bruno Bettelheim is to be believed, fairy stories are as much about the hard work that reality requires as religion or the modern novel.

²¹ In the sense that we cannot believe what we cannot imagine, neither can we imagine what, in some degree, we cannot believe.

no memory without the belief that some event, some relationship of love or hate, has taken place in the past.

If in the novel reality is not a matter of naturalism, nor a matter of verisimilitude, it is, I think, what Leslie Fiedler claims is ‘the irrational reality of the id.’ rather than ‘the hocus pocus of make believe’ – of belief ‘as if’. (Fiedler 1997:157) As soon as ‘irrational reality’ is posited then an alternative existence is conceived that can be defined as transcendental, one which is knowable, but only through a kind of faith which is at the same time a kind of truth. To read a novel is to know-and-not-know the truth of the novel. To read the Bible, unless one is a fundamentalist, is to know-and-not-know the truth of the Bible. In either case, *if* there is a request to believe, it is not gentle. The end of the Gospel of Mark is despairing, the end of Moby Dick cataclysmic. The reader is asked to know that God has forsaken Jesus, and, despite Ishmael’s floating to the surface, we are asked to know that Ahab’s obsession with the white whale has led to disaster. As Derrida comments, ‘who would deny that literature remains a religious remainder; a link to and relay for what is sacrosanct in a society without God?’ (Derrida 2008: 157)

3. 'Inscriptions of homelessness'. (Neubauer 1996) The author in search of the paradisaal home: Hawthorne, Conrad and Nabokov

Why, as a woman writer, choose to examine three novelists all of whom are male, white, and dead in defence of my thesis? The short answer is why not. Novels call to their readers, and the novelist who is still read is not dead. Of the three, one is a proto-modernist who avowedly writes romances, one a modernist and one a post-modernist who, David Lodge says, has learnt the lessons of the modernist and the realist schools. As such none of these works really fall within the later Lukács' category of the realist novel, engaged with society, the epic of the modern world. Indeed, two might not be regarded as novels at all – Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Nabokov's *Pnin* – for they belong to the realm – not necessarily a closed form – of genre fiction.²² Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a long *novella*, barely makes it either, though, Lukács' definition of the short story: 'the narrative form which [...] sees absurdity in all its undisguised and unadorned nakedness [...] gives it the consecration of form; meaninglessness *as meaninglessness* becomes form;' (Lukács 1971:50) it could be said to have the features of a long short story.²³

There are links between the writers. Despite Nabokov's dislike of what he deemed Conrad's second-rate greatness, as émigrés he and Conrad share the deliberate adoption of English as a language to write in. They share physical exile from their natal land, and the experience and loathing of revolution – and where Conrad adopted, though never completely at ease, England for stability, (Watt 1980: 21-23) Nabokov maintained that for him America meant liberation, but still would never really adopt it. They also share, with different results, the way they plunder their lives for their writing, and the fact that both novel and novella were written in instalments, in the interstices of, and as antidotes to, the writing of *Lord Jim* (very successful) and *Lolita* (wildly successful). The protagonists of both works, Pnin and Marlowe, reappear in their other novels – Pnin in *Pale Fire* and Marlow in *Chance*, *Lord Jim*, and *Youth* – as if in some way they are touchstones for their authors.²⁴

²² David Lodge (Lodge 2004) calls *Pnin* one of the first campus novels.

²³ Ian Watt suggests *Heart of Darkness* is 'better called a long *novella*.' (Watt 1980: 224) In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* Lukács says that Conrad is really a short story writer, as his emphasis on personal and moral problems prevents him from 'portraying the totality of life' a novel requires, though his technique makes possible 'that 'triumph of realism' we find in him'. (Lukács 1963:71)

²⁴ As Conrad acknowledges in his Author's note, written in 1917, to *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness* and *The End of the Tether*.

The other side of the Nabokov-Conrad coin is Nabokov's admiration for Hawthorne. At first sight the links between their biographies are minimal. One had an ecstatically happy upbringing, with a devoted mother, in a country he loved, from which he was abruptly and permanently ejected. The other, fatherless, with a depressed mother, had a not very happy childhood excepting the brief freedom of the years they lived in Maine, and, apart from his time in Liverpool and on the Continent, remained within the confines of New England.²⁵ More important are the parallels between the novels. Both are regarded as amongst their author's least problematic works but have occasioned considerable critical discussion, the one over the narrator's voice (which one?) and the other over its ending (why?). In keeping with this ambiguity not only are there in *Pnin* echoes, as usual, of Nabokov's other works, but also of *The House of the Seven Gables*. Both are second-runners, but this does not make them second-rate. But, because they are lesser works, they allow one to avoid being hypnotised by the extraordinary feats, as one can be, of the major novels. They can therefore be more revealing, certainly in the case of Nabokov, of the working out of my thesis.²⁶

Setting aside their histories, the novelists I have chosen seem to offer simultaneously examples of real exile from home and either disavowals of such (Nabokov, Conrad) or desire for such (Hawthorne). Why not choose an author such as Jane Austen, whose novels seem to have such a strong homing instinct? My argument is it doesn't matter whether a novelist writes at home, far from home, about home or about seafaring, about politics or London social life, because he or she will be occupying that site, the novel, trying to reach the home of meaning which the condition of modernity denies. It is how the novelist takes shape in, and shapes the novel, which interests me. Bakhtin says that 'the author utilizes now one language [the narrator's], now another [the normal literary language], in order to avoid giving himself up wholly to either of them' (Bakhtin 1981:314). If it is true that Bakhtin is responding to Lukács, then we could extrapolate from his argument and claim that, in the case of the novel as site of transcendental homelessness, the writer slips into the text between the protagonist and the author. Or to re-formulate the claim in the terms of this thesis – we could argue that the writer and reader stand in the same relation to protagonist as the brockenspectre does to its owner.

²⁵ Like Nabokov, Hawthorne was an inveterate house mover and there is some suggestion that he disliked anywhere he lived after his first married home The Manse.

²⁶ This is not the case for the *Heart of Darkness* which stands alone in his oeuvre because of its status as icon of the twentieth century's soul and is, I argue later, paradigmatic of novels as the site of transcendental homelessness.

The spectre, at the same time attached and unattached, shadows its originator. The writer and the reader do not know each other, nor know each other's heroine, but the heroine each stalks through the novel is both originator and originates in them both – is a construct separate from them and is their construct.

4. Paradise and the house of Pnin

The opening paragraph of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* has the same effect as a Bach fugue played in a white baroque church full of florid curlicues and gold cherubs. Together, the ornamentals which aspire to the grotesque, and the music, reveal an unearthly splendour. The paragraph is a harbinger of a future. By the end of the novel the grotesquery, and flamboyance, of Pnin's appearance will be harnessed to a character of such ornament, for he is the 'brooch' (Nabokov 1957:24) – Laurence Clements is presumably also making a pun on the words 'Pnin' and 'pin' – that the reader will glimpse the heaven for which Nabokov so yearns, but which in his heart he knows is not attainable in this life.²⁷

Breaking many rules, it contains nineteen adjectives and five adverbs some of which demand our attention at once – 'inexorably', 'infantile', 'apish' – and some the reader returns to puzzle over. The picture is unforgettable. His suntan is such that we especially note his baldness, and his tortoise shell glasses mask not what we might expect, his eyes, but his *absent* eyebrows. His upper body is as strong as that of an animal or a circus performer, his lower body almost as weak as a woman's. The second paragraph concentrates on his clothing. We already know about the 'tightish tweed coat' and the flannel trousers. Now we learn of his 'flamboyant goon tie' with its exaggerated width, and the brilliant harlequin socks, so like a clown's, and such a contrast to the conservative socks and suspenders he wore when he was in Europe. Arrived in America, outside his familiar surroundings, has he become a clown?

Why is the description of Pnin – his 'curiously' small feet, his 'bronzed' head that is so like the 'cranium of a space-traveller's helmet', his 'spindly' legs at the 'kroket' match, his 'apish' features and blobby Russian nose – repeated so often through the novel? At first I thought it was due to the way the novel was initially published as four short stories in *The New Yorker*, but it's not the only thing that is repeated. Journeys, which should bring delight to Pnin are altered by intent (Liza), or delayed through mishap (Victor); Pnin's getting lost on his own journeys (to Cremona and Cook's Castle) because he doesn't follow instructions; parties at the start – Clements's – when Pnin overhears himself being mimicked and mocked by Jack Cockerell, and at the end, when Pnin, his stature grown at the prospect of buying his very own castle, refuses, with sophisticated dignity, to listen to a 'scabrous' story that he has heard thirty years before. Squirrels, like guardian angels

²⁷ All future references to *Pnin* will be cited parenthetically by page number only.

(obviously referring to Myra Belochkin, Pnin's first love) occur in every chapter, and act as signals of danger or averters of crisis; there are anonymous dogs at Pnin's arrival at Waindell (the 'species of small boar' who 'stands beside him in much the same candid attitude [as Pnin's]'), (24) waiting to be let in to the wrong house and his departure ('He scraped various titbits [...] to be [...] given to a mangy little white dog with pink patches' (151) who 'leaned out and yapped at Sobakevich' (168). Vandal (Pnin's pronunciation of Waindell) and Vandel (the pseudo French village to be erected by Blorengé, professor of French Literature who cannot speak the language and doesn't like the literature) are almost identical. Then there are the reflections, the black scribbles of twigs and telephone wires, conversations with academics Pnin likes (Lore and Chateau) and brief encounters with academic frauds he doesn't (Komarov and Dr Bodo von Falternfels), and the Greek Catholic cross that makes him a saint to the maid Desdemona, and his agnostic wearing of it deplored by his friend Professor Chateau. These are just some of the thematic motifs whose repetition both structures the novel and reveals to us its hero.²⁸

We read on. The narrator is very knowledgeable. He knows exactly what train Professor Pnin has been advised to catch.²⁹ He is opinionated to the point of prejudice – 'monstrously built farm boys and farm girls' (3) – and astringently acerbic about the teaching of Russian. Not only knowledgeable, he is also very personal. He invades Pnin's privacy, and is unpleasantly knowing. He knows that Pnin is on the wrong train and he knows this is a characteristic failure. Pnin likes to decipher maps and timetables, and Pnin knows better than other people – only he doesn't, the narrator does. The narrator's knowledge is not that of a husband or wife, or a good friend, or a loving son or daughter. The humour is too objective. He knows Pnin as only a close and exasperated colleague can. He confides in us, and displays Pnin to us, almost as a showman would a freak, or a puppeteer a puppet. Is Pnin a freak, a puppet?

We come back to why it is that a man of only fifty-two is described as 'elderly', and why it is that he is 'ideally' bald.³⁰ It seems that, long before the narrator surfaces in Cook's Castle as the not-present guest, the lepidopterist Vladimir Vladimirovich, and with him the 'authorial unease' regarding the treatment of Pnin that David Lodge (Lodge 2004: xviii)

²⁸ It is possible to call Pnin a hero, rather than a protagonist, without irony. In *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* Brian Boyd says that top of Nabokov's list of his characters he most admired was Pnin, 'another courageous victim'. (Boyd 1992: 237)

²⁹ At no time does one imagine this narrator to be female; the voice is male.

³⁰ Fifty-two is two years younger than Nabokov at the time. Is this an indication of Nabokov's attitude to the narrator?

senses in the chapter, either two narrators are operating, or the narrator is conflicted. For is the one who patronises him as ‘elderly’ and uses archaic language like ‘anent’ and ‘for the nonce’ the same as the one who describes him as ‘ideally’ bald? Does this narrator intend us to understand that he is ‘perfectly’ bald, ‘theoretically’ bald, ‘imaginatively’ bald, or, rather, bald in some ‘ideal’ world, thereby giving us the first indication that there is more to Pnin than meets the eye?

To extrapolate from adverb to noun, from ‘ideally’ to ‘the ideal’ is not to say that Pnin’s world is unreal, but to acknowledge that the world he inhabits is both his and not his. It is not Pnin who sees the ‘geometrical solids of various clean-cut shadows’ beyond which lie a ‘hot torpid expanse of cement and sun’ (10). Nor is it Pnin who sees a tree ascend ‘with a brisk scrabbly sound [...] naked into the sky’ (61), nor does he detect the muddiness of the landscape on his landlord’s wall, nor is it he who notes the irony in Victor’s nod at the Van Gogh print on the stairs. The innocent and generous Pnin would after all like Victor to have accompanied him to Cook’s Castle so he could have ‘had the splendid opportunity of being coached by Gramineev’ (110). This time it is not the know-all narrator, whom we have come to eye with suspicion, but his old friend Professor Chateau, who provides the necessary, but ‘softly’, offered, corrective to Pnin’s enthusiasm, ‘You exaggerate the splendour’ (110).

For, despite Pnin’s undoubted ability to detect mediocrity in his students he has sympathy with failure and the mediocre, a sympathy he probably shouldn’t have, revealing an uncritical generosity. His tastes, like his passion for second-rate literature and his probably futile research on his ‘*Petite Histoire* of Russian culture’ (64) are those of the innocent enthusiast who has no awareness of danger. He doesn’t know why Liza marries him, (though six analysts do), or the trick that is played upon her over her derivative poetry, or why she comes back to him ‘carrying before her like a chest of drawers a seven-month pregnancy’ (37) – though the ‘good’ narrator, the one on the side of Pnin making this mordant observation, does. He doesn’t understand the implications of Mrs Thayer’s mention of Isabel’s divorce, and her return home inspires in him a ‘fear and helplessness’ (71), which we might expect of a far more sinister ascent of the stairs than the ‘tripping’ of a girl’s feet as if after a disliked summer camp. He is away when his office is invaded and his desk is relegated to the darkest corner. He agrees with Dr Hagen, who is about to betray him just as the ‘over-adaptive’ Eric Wind did, that intrigue is ‘horrible, horrible’, but ‘honest work will always prove its advantage’ (148). It is an optimism which all his

experience should belie, and is akin to his fascination with the gadgets that always fail him, but when Joan Clement calls him ‘that pathetic savant’, she hits on a truth which at one and the same time underlines, exonerates and extols his character.

‘Pathetic savant’ calls to mind both the wise fool of the ‘*idiot savant*’ and pathos. If much of the humour in *Pnin* is as a result of bathos, of the mockery to which the ‘bad’ narrator subjects him, the admiration the reader feels for him is born out of the pathos the ‘good’ narrator reveals. Combined with his hopeless, clear-eyed, but undying love for Liza, his tenderness as Victor’s ‘water father’ (not only does Pnin take on the role of father after Eric Wind’s departure and Liza Wind’s remarriage but his friends behave as if he is his father – they ask him how Victor is or comment on his talent) and his flinching sorrow for the unspeakable death of Myra Belochkin (the ‘little squirrel’), and other family and friends in the holocaust; his situation as an exile – the ‘weary old want’ of his ‘thirty-five years of homelessness’ (125) – make his hope, and his refusal to give up his loyalties and his decencies, truly heroic.³¹

We learn what it is like for Pnin to be an exile through his attacks of painful nostalgia. They are so painful that he suspects a heart problem, a diagnosis born out of his desperation to deny what they really are, which is rejected by the common sense of narrator and medical profession. What is known about them is that, apart from the fever he had as a boy, they have all occurred after his departure from revolutionary Russia. At those moments Pnin does not remember the past, he is in the past. Or rather the past is present, inserts itself, in him: ‘In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time.’ (Nabokov 1990:78)

Nabokov says of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*: ‘The whole is a treasure hunt where the treasure is time and the hiding place the past’. (Nabokov 1980: 207) One wonders if for Nabokov the opposite is true – that his treasure is the past and the hiding place is time, his project to erase ‘the sickening involutions and interpenetrations of space and time’ that degrade ‘the infinity of [his] sensation and thought’ by his confinement in a ‘finite existence’. (Nabokov 2000:227) He does after all declare in *Speak, Memory*:

‘I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern on another [...] And the highest enjoyment

³¹Priscilla Meyer makes a connection between the real/ideal land-baby/water-baby distinction in Charles Kingsley’s *Water Babies* and the land father (Wind) water father (Pnin). (Meyer 2002)

of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern – to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghost humouring a lucky mortal.’ (Nabokov 2000: 110)

But Nabokov’s past is for him alone: ‘Let visitors trip’.

Like Pnin, who does not believe in ‘an autocratic God’, as a ‘non-unionist’ Nabokov has ‘no use for organized tours through anthropomorphic paradises’ (Nabokov 2000:227).

Unlike Pnin whose alternative to belief in God is a dim and somewhat bathetic belief in a ‘democracy of ghosts’, Nabokov is interested in ‘the other’: what happens after, or happens in, another dimension of life, in the way the personality might dissolve into, and dissolve, space and time. (*Ultima Thule* and *Pale Fire* specifically address this). We see this in the relatively early Russian story, *Torpid Smoke* (Nabokov 1995a). The story is told in the third and the first person, like *Pnin*. Unlike *Pnin* this recounts an experiment. The narrator, a poet, is revealed lying in his room after the evening meal. He looks through his eyelashes and experiences ‘something like second sight’, an ability to be beyond himself in some other space.

Pnin, neither poet nor narrator, does not deliberately seek knowledge of ‘the other’.

Distressed by not having his lecture with him he leaps off the bus taking him to Cremona. The park he walks through on the way back to the bus station has similarities to the screen he observed in his bedroom as a child and which took on a fiendish quality during a high fever. The episode is repeated and to Pnin’s horror he feels himself moving outside the ‘cranium’ that ‘is a space traveller’s helmet’ and begin to ‘mix with the landscape,’ which ‘is the end of the tender ego’ (12) and thinks he is going to die. As befits the doubly exiled and orphaned – the complete loss of every vestige of control over his life – the dissolution is double. Not an experiment, it occurs in space *and* time.

The immediacy of Nabokov’s portrayal allows the reader to glimpse Pnin’s earlier life – even more so in the seismic aftershock he experiences in the lecture hall in Cremona – but it is in almost throwaway remarks that he creates the moments when space and time collide, when the character’s longing, and by implication Nabokov’s longing, and also the reader’s, for, an ideal, a transcendental, home, is crystallised in language.

One such is contained in *Ultima Thule*, ‘where the asphalt is infinitely exalted by the wisteria, and the air smells of rubber and paradise?’ (Nabokov 1995a:500) It both names and evokes paradise. It is an example of James Wood’s ‘thisness’ in search of ‘lifeness’, the moments of absolute reality he cites in support of his argument that realism in fiction needs restating and reinstating. (James Wood 2008) It is like Barthes’ “‘moments of truth” (I find no other expression)’, to which however Barthes categorically denies an ascription of “realism” and whose existence is ‘moreover [...] absent from every theory of the novel’. (Barthes 1986:287) It is akin to Joyce’s description of an epiphany:

‘...By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent moments.’ (From *Stephen Hero*; quoted Kettle 1944:301).

The example from *Ultima Thule* is an instance of extraordinary writing, but this linguistic crystallisation doesn’t have to be about paradise to be paradisaal. The description of the remedy for the fever of the ‘poor cocooned pupa’, Timosha: ‘It consisted of a layer of soaked linen, a thicker layer of absorbent cotton, and another of tight flannel, with a sticky diabolical oilcloth – the *hue of urine and fever* – coming between the *clammy pang* of the linen next to his skin and the *excruciating squeak* of the cotton around which the outer layer of flannel was wound.’³² (14-15) strikes us with almost supra-sensual accuracy, though the passage is anything but exalted. Urine and fever may have colours but they are not commonly assigned to oilcloth, nor does linen have ‘pangs’, and the ‘excruciating squeak’ of abused cotton is similar to being able to hear bats – not part of our normal experience. Yet this combination of synaesthesia and pinning down of existence creates out of Pnin’s past in the Russia of 1913, his presence in the America of the 1950’s, and our lives in the 2000s, an explosion of meaning, a linguistic fusion where the homelessness of the hero (and reader and author) come to a brief full stop. And although Nabokov, with his overt and covert God-like control of his novels – ‘My characters are galley slaves’ – (Nabokov 1990: 95) would probably not wish us to locate him in any of the characters, and there is no way of proving his existence in the novel, with Pnin the only link between the reader and him the author, *a* Nabokov has to be in there with us, whether as good-bad narrator, Chateaubriand, Victor, even Pnin himself – but never the banal, like Liza with her ‘shrivelled, helpless, lame’ soul (47), or the witless, like Judith Clyde, whose ‘two

³² My emphasis

bright eyes' bask 'in blue lunacy behind her 'rimless pince-nez'(18), whose lack of self-knowledge rules them out.

This metaphorical bridging of the abyss between desire and life would seem to work very well for the ironically, frequently, and fictionally, self-referential Nabokov. Lukács however, thinks this type of fiction, which he identifies in Sterne, can never achieve what he wants the novel to have, the quality of epic.³³ Is such a circumstance necessary, possible, or even desirable? David Lodge, categorising novels as realist, modernist or metafictional (placing Sterne in the last category) talks of the reappearance, after what he calls the 'mimesis of consciousness' of 'the modernist pursuit of impersonality' (43), of diegesis in post-modern fiction. Metafiction, he says,

'has been particularly useful as a way of continuing to exploit the resources of realism while acknowledging their conventionality [...] the more **nakedly** an author appears to reveal himself [...] the more inescapable it becomes, paradoxically, that the author as a *voice* is only a function of his own fiction, a rhetorical construct, not a privileged authority but an object of interpretation.' (Lodge 1990:43)

This pinpoints the manner in which the metafictional novel helps the theorist escape from Barthes' binary dichotomy of Author and Reader, so it becomes neither necessary to eradicate the author, nor place the whole onus of meaning upon the reader. Lodge, as we have seen, is extrapolating from Bakhtin's view that, as discourse in the novel is essentially parodic, then 'It is as if the author has no language of his own, but does possess his own style, his own organic and unitary law governing the way he plays with languages and the way his own real and semantic intentions are refracted within them.' (Bakhtin 198:311)

Edmund Wilson's review of Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, though he identifies in it Nabokov's attempt to marry his American and Russian sides, was sufficiently antagonistic and critical not only of Nabokov's English, but also his Russian, as to elicit a response from Nabokov which was direct and scathing, his habitual verbal games and parody deserting him. It seems Wilson managed to penetrate the disguise, the carapace constructed by artifice and distance, which allows Nabokov to declare, ironically: 'I am as American as April in Arizona.'³⁴ In the interview Nabokov goes on to say how, despite the links he finds in the Western American states with Asiatic and Arctic Russia, he

³³ 'Sterne's glorious ringing voice' offers 'no more than reflexions of a world-fragment which is merely subjective and therefore limited, narrow and arbitrary.' (Lukács 1971:54)

³⁴ Or, as Michael Schmidt suggests 'Kansas in August'.

can never regard ‘American regional literature, or Indian dances, or pumpkin pie on a spiritual plane.’ (Nabokov 1990:98) Bathos is one way of deflecting seriousness and obvious emotion which might be revelatory, but in Nabokov’s work bathos points to what it pretends to disguise. It is because of what Nabokov owes to the Russian landscape and language that he cannot be spiritually at home in America even though he takes pride in his American passport. This is why he is so angry with Edmund Wilson. He has attacked Nabokov’s origins. All Nabokov was able to bring with him: ‘all the Russia I need is always with me: literature, language, and my own Russian childhood.’ (Nabokov 1990:10) In consequence it is everything to him. Worse, he has attacked Nabokov’s languages, Russian and English.

In Galya Dimant’s article, ‘English as Sanctuary: Nabokov’s and Brodsky’s Autobiographical Writings’, she argues that English offered Nabokov a chance to write his autobiography, about what mattered most to him, which was not ‘trivialising’ and allowed him to access an ‘Aloof, impersonal, art’ in which to ‘re-live and even redeem the losses of his parents’ (Dimant 1993:352). The way Nabokov chooses to write is different in both his Russian and his English novels, and in *Speak, Memory*. His Russian writing is less mannered, less complex, in translation, though the seeds of complexity are there, but I do not think English is a sanctuary. Josipovici quotes him as saying: ‘the host language should be twisted and bent by the original’, (Josipovici 1988:33) which indicates an ambiguity in his attitude to English. A host is hospitable and welcoming, but is vulnerable to parasites; the opportunities offered by the English language are both grasped and resented, and the parasite carries out violence on the host. It is as if having to write in English sets Nabokov free to be as playful as he likes, but because this freedom is gained at the price of a permanent exile he has to increase the play threefold: he recreates a remembered Paradise; calls attention to what he has done, thereby undermining it; calls attention to the undermining to re-conceal it – a bluff to pull the wool over the eyes of the world in order to hide his hurt. At the same time he maintains that his first book *Mary* gets ‘home’ out of his system leaving him to explore any realm he likes, but as is obvious from the way he recycles episodes, memories, phrases, ideas – Pnin removes ‘his glasses to beam at the past while massaging the lenses of the present’ (4), while in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov sees his first love Tamara ‘through the carefully wiped lenses of time,’ (Nabokov 2000: 178) – Nabokov is never free from his search for his home.

At the start of this chapter I made the claim that in *Pnin* the reader would glimpse heaven. How can this be the case? By the end of the novel the reader has seen the clownish Pnin battered by fate – in love, in work, in fatherhood; by objects, by modes of transport, by the weather; by his body, by his curiosity, by his enthusiasms. We can relate to this battering – it has truth, albeit comically exaggerated. Pnin's response has been tender, testy, rueful, dignified, principled, impassioned. Where is the self-pity, the anger, the revenge? His responses are ideal rather than real. It is what we want him to be, because we want to be, like him, a heavenly space traveller. After what Lodge calls the 'brilliantly executed reversal of expectation' [Lodge 2010: xv] when all Pnin's, our, and the author's, hopes would be finally dashed if the bowl of such ideal beauty, a gift of such ideal love, had not remained intact, Pnin leaves Waindell. His dog yapping out of the car window at the dog of the unpleasant Jack Cockerell and his sycophantic wife, he speeds in his 'egg-shaped two door sedan', once seen to 'raise dust behind like a back-kicking dog' (97), into the dawn, ignoring, as is proper given the betrayal of him with Liza, the narrator's (possibly one V.V. Nabokov) plea for reconciliation.³⁵ As James Wood says, 'Nabokov's novel is constructed in such a way as to excite in us a desire for a real Professor Pnin, a 'true fiction' with which to oppose the false fictions of the overbearing and sinister narrator.' (Wood 2008:85) But Nabokov doesn't excite in us the desire for a true fiction. He gives us both. Even the ideal can be real. And the real, ideal: "What startling beauty of phrase, twists of thought, depths of sorrow and bursts of wit! ... It was Nabokov's gift to bring Paradise wherever he alighted." – John Updike, *The New York Times Review*,³⁶

But can the concept of the novel as the site of transcendental homelessness where protagonist, reader and author briefly find paradise exist in modes other than the post-modern? According to Edythe Haber in her article on *Glory*, Alfred Appel Jr. maintained that Nabokov began every first lecture of the year at Cornell by saying, 'Great novels are above all great fairy tales... literature does not tell the truth but makes it up.' (Haber 1977:222) *Glory*, replete with fairy tale motifs, asserts that the 'fairy tale' life of Martin's imagination, his ultimate impetus in going back over the border into Russia, is more valid than the banality of his actual life. Are great novels fairy tales? Do they tell the truth? It is Hawthorne's inverted fairy story, *The House of the Seven Gables*, (which Nabokov in his turn inverts), that I will now consider.

³⁵ It is not the first time this dog appears as David Lodge claims. (Lodge 2004: xix)

³⁶ Quoted on the back cover of *The stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (1995. New York. Vintage)

5. Corruption in Pyncheon-street

Why did Nabokov say that Hawthorne was one of his two favourite American writers? (Nabokov 1990:64) Perhaps because he recognised in him an understanding of and ability to conceal and reveal the corrupted nature of humanity – as D.H. Lawrence says of Hawthorne: ‘That blue-eyed darling Nathaniel knew disagreeable things in his inner soul. He was careful to send them out in disguise.’ (Lawrence 1924:85)

Certainly the influence of ‘Rappacini’s Daughter’, his great tale about corruption, has been detected in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Meyer 2007), and the reader of Hawthorne is nearly always left with ‘the mental counterpart of a bad taste in the mouth.’ (Nabokov 2010:157) a sense of having inhabited a world where nothing is as it seems, everything may be nastier than it appears and with which one has been made complicit. Do we, by reading Hawthorne, become in some way corrupt ourselves? If corrupted can we then assert that in Hawthorne the protagonist is wandering homeless in search of sure transcendental values – however Hawthorne conceives them?

Intuition hints that we cannot, but, for Anthony Trollope and D.H. Lawrence, reading Hawthorne takes us on a journey to paradise, but through depths he doesn’t disguise:

‘You have been ennobled by that familiarity with sorrow [...] He will have plunged you into melancholy, he will have overshadowed you with black forebodings, he will almost have crushed you with imaginary sorrows; but[...]Something of the sublimity of the transcendent, something of the mystery of the unfathomable, something of the brightness of the celestial, will have attached itself to you, and you will all but think that you too might live to be sublime, and revel in mingled light and mystery.’ (Trollope 1879:206-207)

For, ‘out of a pattern of lies art weaves the truth’, and Hawthorne’s art reveals an ‘impeccable truth’. (Lawrence 1924:8)

There are other doubts about using *The House of the Seven Gables* as a testing ground. Borges maintains that Hawthorne, while he is the progenitor of the ‘dream’ quality of great American literature, is not so much a novelist as a short story writer, starting as he does from situation rather than character. (Borges 1964) This position is held substantially by Trollope, who believes that *The Scarlet Letter*, being plot driven, is the only one of Hawthorne’s works that the reader can really approach as a novel. We read *The House of the Seven Gables*, Trollope says, for the writing, the philosophy, and the satire, not for the

story.³⁷ Whether novel or short story, or as Hawthorne claims, a romance, I wish to suggest the book uses the form of a fairy story by inversion.

In his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* Hawthorne says his work cannot be assigned ‘an actual locality’ as ‘it exposes the Romance to an inflexible and exceedingly dangerous species of criticism, by bringing his fancy-pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of the moment.’ (Hawthorne 2009: 3)³⁸ Hawthorne’s use of the term fancy-pictures, whether the 18th century or the post-Coleridge ‘fancy’, has connotations of the fantastical which seems to substantiate all the views that say he is not a novelist. Yet *The House of the Seven Gables* isn’t like one of his books of short stories, and, despite his misgivings Trollope also observes that it becomes a novel because Hawthorne ‘had to write it’. (Trollope 1879: 213) Nor, as a romance, is it a Lukács’ entertainment, because, in spite of its being given a moral by Hawthorne, which would argue a predetermined outcome for his protagonist (but which protagonist?), Hawthorne is only too aware that something other than a ‘moral of the story’ is taking place: ‘When romances do really teach anything, or produce any effective operation, it is usually through a far more subtle process than the ostensible one.’ (2) Moreover, if Benjamin is right about the centrality of remembrance to the novel then Hawthorne’s concerns are those of the novelist. What he is attempting is to unravel and undo the effects of the past on the present. Having exposed the natives of Salem to an unpalatable truth about themselves with his ‘Custom House’ sketch and *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne metaphorically wiped the dust of the place off his feet, announcing that henceforth he would live elsewhere and the inhabitants would become dim remembrances, for planting generation after generation of human beings in the same soil was as bad for them as it was for potatoes. Not only that, his writing was going to change (like Nabokov’s did when he decided to start writing in English) – it would become altogether less grim.³⁹

In the last chapter I observed that in his portrayal of Cook’s Castle, which has close affinities with the ‘old Pyncheon-house’, Nabokov had inverted the fairy tale of *The House of the Seven Gables*. Not only does Nabokov’s description echo Hawthorne’s, although

³⁷ I am delighted he says this because at my first reading I took the book to be a satire upon the Gothic, in much the same way as Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* is.

³⁸ All future references to *The House of the Seven Gables* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically by page number only.

³⁹ Indeed his wife Sophie much preferred this new novel.

Cook's Castle – despite having lost, along with the magic effects of its curative (not poisoned) waters, its economic base – is a happier version of the house, but in repeating the word 'Cook' three times he refers directly to the earlier novelist's use of repetition, though to different effect. In Nabokov's use of 'Cook's', 'Cook's Place' and 'Cook's Castle' the possessive is undercut by the owner's generosity and by the mundanity and anonymity of its earlier name, which offers hope to the hopeless, 'and Pnin at the height of hopelessness, found himself on a paved road with a rusty but still glistening sign directing wayfarers 'To the Pines'.' (Nabokov 2010:100) This may be a fairy-tale home to which Pnin and the rest of his academic Russian expatriates can escape for refreshment and mutual support, but the presence of the new generation, the American children of the exiles, adolescents only happy sitting in a car listening to jazz on the radio, counters any false hopes of return to *patria*, and emphasises the 'reality' of his life.

The possessive is more insistent in *The House of the Seven Gables*, ostensibly the 'sunniest' of Hawthorne's novels. We are given 'Pyncheon-house', 'Pyncheon-elm', and 'Pyncheon-street', once each, and 'Maule's Lane' twice. The description of the house which follows is bleak. Its facade grows 'black in the prevalent east-wind', (traditionally a killing wind) and reveals the prevalence of the 'vicissitudes' of life, how 'expediency [...] sow[s] the acorns of a more enduring growth, which may darkly overshadow their posterity.' (6)

While Nabokov tries to recapture through his writing, despite the 'sadness' which Pnin is always trying to push from his mind, the past, and past bliss, Hawthorne recalls the past to rid himself of it and gain present and future bliss. However to deny the past, as he does in 'The Custom House', doesn't necessarily mean it's gone away. Instead it becomes submerged, altering the surface of his writing. Trollope's description of the actions of the devilishly vengeful leech, Roger Chillingworth, in *The Scarlet Letter* could be a description of Hawthorne's practice and predicament: 'He simply lives with his enemy in the same house, attacking not the man's body, [...] but his conscience, till we see the wretch writhing beneath his treatment.' (Trollope 1879:211) If, as Hawthorne fears, a writer is no better than a fiddler, and the fiddle, we remember, is the devil's instrument, then what Hawthorne finds himself doing, whether he wants to or no, is dealing with the evil of the society he has inherited, which is, will-he nil-he, part of himself. He is the leech who will suck his sustenance from the past. Like Nabokov, Hawthorne cannot avoid being a parasite upon his host.

The evil in *The House of the Seven Gables* is located in the very name-change the street undergoes, the corrupting nature of possessions both material and spiritual. A Colonel Pyncheon wants the land of one Matthew Maule on which there is a 'natural spring of soft and pleasant water'. (Hawthorne 2009:6) To get it he accuses Maule of witchcraft. Maule, doomed to execution by those who *know* they possess the God-given truth, (Hawthorne's recognition of his own witch-hunting ancestor Judge Hathorne is implicit here), lays a curse upon Pyncheon: "'God will give him blood to drink!'" and the 'village-gossips' hint that there will be dire results for the new landowner who is 'about to build his house over an unquiet grave.' (8-9)

So it proves. Every male Pyncheon thereafter dies of some kind of apoplexy that results in a rush of blood from their mouths, and the Maule's disappear from the neighbourhood – though not until the son of the first Maule bewitches Alice Pyncheon unto her death, partly in revenge for the loss of his inheritance, but also because she looks at him, when he comes to do some work for her father, as if he is an animal they own. The Pyncheons rape the Maules of their land because in them the impulse to materialism inherent in Puritanism is overweening. Prosperity, for Puritans the sign of God's grace, becomes an end in itself. Hawthorne seems to oppose the magic of Maule to the avarice of Pyncheon, but magic, apart from being deemed a sin, is itself an exercise of power over the person and this therefore cannot be an unqualified opposition. In effect what is opposed to the 'common-sense, as massive and hard as blocks of granite, fastened together by stern rigidity of purpose,' (9) is imagination. However, because the fruit of the imagination, the story, is relayed to us through the person of the sometimes cruel, mostly impartial, judge-like narrator, it also is called into question as source of the good.

There is no one hero in *The House of the Seven Gables*, unlike in *Pnin* (this lack of biography raises yet another query as to the nature of the book), but as is the case in *Pnin*, the first chapter functions as a setting of scene. However, like *Pnin*, the scene setting is not back story, for it contains within itself the whole of the book. In both cases the writer has given us all we need to know. Nabokov reveals to us *Pnin*, his comedy and his love, the harsh and less harsh judgements of the narrator(s). Hawthorne tells us about the Pyncheons. The house is a church raised 'in pride' to mammon. The guests approach it 'as [...] a congregation on its way to church' (11), the door they enter through has 'almost the breadth of a church-door' (12). The original sin of Colonel Pyncheon is repeated down

time as each of those of his descendants with more of the energy and practical ability of his founding ancestor, not made effete and lazy by the prospect of a future huge inheritance in the shape of the imaginary 'possessions' in Maine, improves the family fortunes, but fails to make reparation. This is the sum of the narrative.

What is the purpose of these summaries? In the case of *Pnin*, though partly because of the book's initial creation as short stories, (Nabokov maintains the whole novel was in his head at the book's inception), it results in a character of whom we approve from the outset. The dual narrator creates immediate sympathy with Pnin, about whose life as clown and man of sorrow we would like to know more. With *The House of the Seven Gables* we are given the legend of both families, though principally of the Pyncheons, rather than the Maules, as befitting not only the principal committers of the crime, but also respecting the more private nature of magicians and their disappearance from the scene. There is actually no reason for us to read on, except that we are following the lead of the narrator, both omniscient and insistently present (in a way which is only intermittently allowed to Nabokov's narrator), who compels us through the inert reconciliation of the houses of Maule and Pyncheon. Such inertia in the narrative is as necessary to *The House of the Seven Gables* as the static nature of Pnin's character (we change, he doesn't) is to *Pnin*. Judge Pyncheon dies with his illusions intact, at the point where the map which will grant the illusory fairy tale wealth of Maine is about to be found (just as his forebear died as the deal was about to be ratified). The later death releases Phoebe and Will from the curse of both families, but at a cost. It seems the curse can only be nullified if the power of Phoebe's golden happiness is tarnished, as it is by contact with Hepzibah and Clifford Pyncheon, however sympathetic to, and perceptive of, her they become. Similarly it can only be cancelled if Holgrave relinquishes his magic Maule abilities, as he does when he restrains himself and refrains from hypnotising Phoebe. Both parties – Phoebe and Holgrave – have to give up something ideal in order to be reconciled.

This relinquishing is not progressive, and its stasis suggests something about the nature of the world. It is not a view of history as dynamic, or human nature as significantly alterable. It is in this inability to change that the idea of the inverted fairy story lies. If oral stories teach us, as both Bettelheim and Benjamin claim, about how to grow up and live in the real world, then the fairy-tale ending, with its customary speed and almost indifferent narration of the despatch of the ogre (Judge Pyncheon's physique is typical of such a monster), the inheritance of wealth, and marriage, says to us that all will be well once the house of evil is

left. Of course it isn't, because in this, unlike in fairy tales, the characters take their evil with them. Where Pnin rejects the opportunity, for the first time since he was orphaned, of a secure home because he will not work for someone who has done him so much damage, he maintains his principles. Hepzibah, Clifford and Phoebe, however, exchange one Pyncheon home for another. The presence of Uncle Venner – to live in the Pyncheon grounds in a 'gingerbread' cottage – rather than supporting Holgrave's vision of a property-less, socialist society, underscores his abandonment of it and his adoption of the Pyncheon values. The new house should, Holgrave thinks, have been made of stone. He has grown 'conservative'. He has grown possessive.

The reconciliation of Maule and Pyncheon is no recipe for a beautiful future. The novel is an account of the failure to overcome the tyrant of tradition. Ultimately the past possesses the Pyncheons, keeps them in its power, will not let them go. They are like the barrel-organ figures, a 'fortunate little society' who enjoy a 'harmonious existence' who can dance to the organ-grinders music, but come to a halt when the money is no longer rained down on his devilish monkey-assistant with his strongly emphasised and improperly 'thick' tail 'curling out' from 'beneath his tartans'. (163-4) Rather than allegorically, here Hawthorne seems to be writing symbolically, but with meanings that lie close to the surface, and it is here, where his Puritan allegory cedes to the symbolic, that Hawthorne becomes the forerunner of the modernist novel. In response, so the narrator tells us, to the implication of avarice and sexuality, Clifford bursts into tears. Despite the narrator's direction, Clifford and the reader know that it is to the symbolism of the figures trapped in their dance, their circumstances, that he is really responding, as the subsequent episode, when he runs away after discovering the Judge is dead, makes clear. He understands what is wrong, but his sensitivity undermines rather than helps him resist the tyrannical and materialistic values of his forefathers.

Through the narrator (he is never embodied) Hawthorne conducts a debate about how one should live – possessing and being possessed, whether by money and the past, or by a greed for new ideas and new science. Neither position can be endorsed. Nor is imagination – fancy – an alternative. Or rather, undercut as fancy is by the tone of the narrative voice and Clifford's feeble aestheticism, it is an alternative that leaves the reader with little option other than to be sardonic and clear-sighted about society, like the narrator, and, it would appear, the author. The reader is left with a glimpse of how things are, rather than how we'd like them to be.

Is the wandering search for some revelation of paradise which I suggest is fundamental to the novel, and to be found, even if ultimately abandoned, in *The Scarlet Letter*, to be discovered in *The House of the Seven Gables*? Nabokov turns ‘The Pines’ ironically into a ‘castle’ and the pun on ‘Pnin’ and ‘Pines’ makes it truly ‘The house of Pnin’, a location for Pnin to star. He escapes from the narrator – who fails to turn up – to reveal himself as an ace croquet player, the civilised intellectual equal, even if naive, of his fellow Russian émigrés, and a man of deep emotion. Hawthorne’s seven-gabled house, on the other hand, is both fantastic and at the same time stands for an implacable, punitive reality: the past is inescapable. All that can be done to evade it is, fictionally, (in terms of the fiction, to die) to run away. In this case the traditional resolution offered by the fairy story form – a growth through change into maturity – deludes. According to D.H. Lawrence, America was settled by people who did not come for ‘positive freedom’ but ‘came largely to get away [...] away from *themselves*.’⁴⁰ (Lawrence 1924: 9) No change can take place here. We are all corrupted, and corruptible, as we have been since the very first Eden. It is a matter not so much of, ‘Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.’ (Lawrence 1924: 9) as: trust the artist *and* the tale. For when Hawthorne denies writing novels and says he writes romances he is telling us something about his work which is perilous to ignore. What he writes in the guise of easily swallowed fairy story ‘fancy-pictures’ – romances – are instead fancies of the imagination which reveal ‘disagreeable things’. To the extent that *The House of the Seven Gables* locates a truth about the way his characters, and by implication ourselves and Hawthorne himself, are trapped, if not by greed, then by convention and tradition, there is revelation, and therefore a moment of transcendence, though not typically, nor palatably, paradisaical.

⁴⁰ Second emphasis in the quotation is mine.

6. Void at the heart of the Congo

Nabokov's disdain for Conrad may be a reaction to the comparisons made between them: two men, both exiles, choosing to write in a language that is not native to them. However, as Nabokov observed, he was a writer from the outset, unlike Conrad who was a latecomer to the profession. Or perhaps in Conrad's case vocation is the better term. In a letter to E.V. Lucas in 1908, he writes: '...a man who puts forth the secret of his imagination to the world accomplishes a religious rite.' (Said 1966: 44) Another possible factor in Nabokov's response is that as someone who wouldn't sign up to any organised belief, but who, according to D. Barton Johnson and Brian Boyd (D. Barton Johnson and Brian Boyd 2002), owned an interest in a possible other world, the identification of this quasi-mystical attitude in Conrad's writing, who also refused to sign up to organised belief, might have made Conrad too close for comfort,.

The religious rite Conrad wanted to achieve was, through his fiction, 'to make you *see*', (Conrad 1965:13) but as we discover in *Heart of Darkness*, a novel which is in part about the way words create and miscreate, he was uneasy at the way language could sway people's feelings and intellect. It is an ambiguity about writing whose strength and complexity falls between that of Nabokov's relish of it and Hawthorne's guilt about it, and is never completely resolved.⁴¹ *Heart of Darkness* has also to be *the* example of a novel in which the protagonist wanders in search of a transcendental home, based as it is on Marlow's love of wandering the 'blank space[s] of delightful mystery' (Conrad 1960:33) on maps.⁴² The 'biggest, the most blank, so to speak' (33) place (apart from the ultimate space, the North Pole, which is made of nothing but sea and ice, where he will now no

⁴¹ Hawthorne's dubiousness results from his understanding of how his ancestors would regard his fiction – as scribbling – and his ambition, declared in 'Sights from a Steeple' (Hawthorne 1851), to peer into people's lives and souls, a presumptuous prying inherited from his forebears. At first sight this doubt is akin to the unease that, according to David Lodge (Lodge 2004), Nabokov seems to feel at his treatment of Pnin which results in Nabokov rebuking the two narrators possibly made one in Vladimir Vladimirovich. VV is punished by being refused the chance to reconcile himself to an old friend he has wronged. However, the reprimand is not a complete rejection, for Nabokov allows him to set up his department. Pnin, as befits his 'ideal' status, is permitted to go forward into the future, but the permanent post he gains in the later *Pale Fire* restores him to the mundane. Hawthorne is more overtly equivocal. In 'The Devil in Manuscript' the rejected author, Oberon, (Hawthorne's nickname at college), feels he has deluded himself: 'I have become ambitious of a bubble [...] I am surrounding myself with shadows, which bewilder me by aping the realities of life.' (Hawthorne 1851:131) He is determined to burn the fancies that have come from his brain, believing that his tales of witchcraft have ensnared him as if the work of the devil himself, and are worthless. His friend, the narrator, puts up some objections but not very strong ones – he too is of the opinion that the stories will make a brighter blaze in the fireplace than they will in the market place. The manuscript burns, setting alight the chimney, the thatch, and then the roofs of the other houses in the town. In the ironic insanity of Oberon's brain his words have 'set the town on fire', and he counts himself a success, even though a devilish one.

⁴² All future references to *Heart of Darkness* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically by page number only.

longer go) which he has wanted to travel to, is the centre of Africa. By the time he gets the opportunity the land has been invaded by colonisers and the map is filled in. What does he *want* to find in this place, whose immense snake-like river, penetrating into the heart of the continent, fascinates him as it would a 'silly little bird'?

In Africa what he does find is The Company and Kurtz. Marlow, sickened by the hellish vision of the dying workers, is derisive at the misuse of language in the interest of profit: 'I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition [of the Africans] I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers – and these were rebels.' (100) In his disillusion the rumour of a 'remarkable' man, to whose rescue the Company requires him to go, breeds in him a kind of lust, not so much to see him as to hear his voice. Kurtz becomes in his mind the alternative to all he detests: the 'flabby rapacity' of the 'pilgrims' which is compounded by their silliness, the manager's concern only for himself, with his smile like 'a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping' (51) revealing an amorality which scandalizes him. He wants to hear Kurtz's ideas because they will put right what is wrong.

Kurtz and Marlow are both 'wanderers'. Or rather they appear to be. Marlow wanders over the seas of 'two hemispheres', Kurtz 'that Shadow – this wandering and tormented thing' (109) – landlocked in the 'wilderness' of Africa. They are, or appear to be, seekers, the outcome of their search not that dissimilar. The result of Marlow's wanderings is the stories he tells. He is a raconteur of 'inconclusive experiences' whose meaning is 'outside, enveloping the tale' (30). Kurtz, whose 'proper sphere ought to have been politics "on the popular side"' is an orator: "'– but heavens! How that man could talk. He electrified large meetings. He had faith – don't you see? – he had the faith.'" (118) and can sway people with his tongue. Abandoning his original purpose he sets himself up as the master of a tribe of Africans, and uses his gift in *his* tale but his report, 'The Suppression of Savage Customs', with its post script to 'Exterminate the brutes', is anything but inconclusive. Its hypocrisy and brutal savagery is an indictment of his profession – journalism – his idealism and himself.

What Marlow throughout his journey has to go on is hearsay. When he finally does encounter Kurtz, his voice, though deep and hypnotic, does not, unlike its effect on the

‘harlequin’ Russian, cause Marlow to idolise Kurtz.⁴³ For, instead of a ‘remarkable’ man, what he finds is someone as hollow as his counterpart, the ‘papier-mâché Mephistopheles’, the brick-maker who doesn’t make bricks, because something hasn’t come from Europe.

Marlow’s horror at what has happened to Kurtz appears both conventional and racist: Kurtz has gone native. The reduction of Kurtz’s followers to adoring, terrified, slaves – they ‘crawl’ before him – appals him, as does Kurtz’s becoming a slave to their adulation. Kurtz lacks restraint: ‘the heavy mute spell of the wilderness [...] seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts’ [he has] ‘kicked himself loose of the earth.’ (110). Marlow understands the impulse, and is only saved from, as he sees it, his own capacity for atavism, by restraint (possessed also by the cannibals), which, along with dedication to work (possessed similarly by his helmsman) in which a man can find himself, is one of his two highest values. Although Chinua Achebe (Achebe 1977) is right to say that Conrad doesn’t permit the African characters language, (apart from frenzied yells and two significant utterances), and that Marlow’s description of his fireman is derogatory, the question of whether Marlow denies humanity to them is important. If anything, *Heart of Darkness* emphasises the difference between Marlow and the landscape of Africa, as Anne McClintock (McClintock 1984) suggests, rather than Marlow and the natives he encounters, and is ambivalent towards the paternalist ideology of ‘primitive’ Africans precisely because that opens the way for predatory colonialism.⁴⁴ The ‘mysterious’ empty spaces Marlow desires represent in him a search for knowledge which is at odds with a convinced racism. Marlow accepts his kinship with his helmsman, and with the figures on the river bank. Above all, Kurtz’s lack of restraint is an indictment not of the ‘primitive’ African, but of the ‘glamour’ of (33), and the glamorizing of, the wilderness, in which Marlow too has indulged.

Equally Marlow’s search is at odds with a convinced idealism. Conrad’s juxtaposition of Marlow and Kurtz is not antithetical – Kurtz is not Marlow’s *alter ego* – nor is it as a double – Kurtz is not a *doppelgänger*.⁴⁵ At the start of the novel Marlow is set apart both

⁴³ Is Pnin in his harlequin scarlet socks with ‘lilac lozenges’ Nabokov’s riposte to Conrad’s Russian, taken in by the meretricious words and ideas of Kurtz? Or is he an acknowledgement and development of the Russian’s limp soul?

⁴⁴ Ian Watt rebuts Achebe’s charge by suggesting that Marlow can’t be racist because Kurtz’s native wife is magnificent (Watt 2000:88). He supports this rebuttal by pointing to the contrast Conrad draws between her and the repellently, ivory-white, Intended. However, he acknowledges that a supremacist paternalism was current at the time of Conrad’s writing.

⁴⁵ In this Miriam and Hild, main characters in *The Brockenspectre* are similar: neither *alter ego*, nor *doppelgänger*, the *brockenspectre* image is designed to make them like and unlike.

physically and mentally. He is leaning against the mast aft *looking* like a ‘Buddha’, an ‘idol’, (which, in contrast to Kurtz, he doesn’t actually become). As the teller of yarns, the storyteller, he is different from the company of materially successful and complacent listeners on the Thames whom he is trying to civilise. Kurtz, stockpiling fantastic amounts of ivory, has in the eyes of the Company prematurely despoiled the country and by his hoarding has set himself apart from them and their aims. Now, despite Marlow’s disgust at what he finds in Kurtz, out of pig-headedness and revulsion at the companions with whom he is forced to consort, Marlow too sets himself apart from the (Belgian) Company, and remains loyal to Kurtz. Marlow offsets Kurtz ironically. They are like and unlike each other – it is in Kurtz’s misuse of words, and what that reveals, the self-deception and possessiveness of Kurtz’s ‘elevated sentiments’: ‘My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas’ (113), that Marlow’s greatest horror lies. Claiming to *own* people and places is appalling. To *own* ideals is abhorrent. The difference between ‘the wandering seeker’, Marlow, and ‘the wandering seeker’, Kurtz, is that Kurtz only appears to be a wanderer and a seeker. Fixedly idealist before he comes to Africa, Kurtz is fixedly autocratic after he comes to Africa. Conrad pits Marlow against Kurtz. To Kurtz’s viewing Africa only from his own perspective, he opposes Marlow’s struggle, without an adequate vocabulary, to perceive, to ‘see’ Africa.⁴⁶ The endeavour to understand almost breaks Marlow for he learns two terrible lessons. The first is that the romantic idea of the ‘mysterious’ blank space is not full of a transcendental mystery, merely full of a misery which is man-made, created by the voice of someone who determines to be the god of an enslaved tribe. The second is that the goal Marlow has sought in these empty spaces is also, and in fact, more than empty – it is a void, because what he seeks can never be expressed.

Marlow’s blank spaces are contained within a text whose construction as ‘oral’ is deceptive; what it conceals is as important as what it reveals. *Heart of Darkness* takes place in a set of qualifying parentheses made up of: the Thames, frame narrator, narrator, Belgium, the Station, up river, Kurtz’s station, down river, Belgium, narrator, frame narrator, the Thames. But at the ‘mute’ centre, almost where one would expect to find a kernel of truth, as there would be in a seaman’s, a storyteller’s, reminiscences, there is the vast silence of their wait before they reach their destination.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ What Conrad gives us in Marlow’s response to the Congo is a classic example of the dislocated person’s attempt to come to grips with an alien landscape: his language simply can’t cope and for the most part he is reduced to abstractions many of which are negative – the number of words he uses that begin with the prefix ‘in’ is notable – in his attempt to describe the wilderness around him.

⁴⁷ It is the actual, as well as the stylistic, middle of the book,

‘The current ran smooth and swift, but a dumb immobility sat on the banks. The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf. It was not sleep – it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf – then the night came suddenly and you were blind as well.’ (74)

Despite a fish leaping which makes Marlow ‘jump as though a gun has been fired’ (74), this pause continues after the sun has risen:

‘[...] there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all round you like something solid. At eight or nine, perhaps, it lifted as shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of the trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it – all perfectly still – and then the white shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves.’ (74)

It is at this moment of absolute stasis, whether he recognises it or not, at the heart of the emptiness he has always sought, that Marlow changes. Conrad’s description becomes more objective. The wilderness, the mimesis and carrier of Marlow’s dislocation, ceases to be hostile. Marked, as *Heart of Darkness* has been, by Marlow’s struggle to find a way to describe the strangeness of the Africa in which he finds himself, now there are no words. Of the forms of narrative offered in *Heart of Darkness*: the ‘unmistakably real’ *Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship* (72), Kurtz’s oratory, Marlow’s tale, none can express the inexpressible.

For at the centre which is no centre there has to be silence. Derrida, in *Literature in Secret* derives literature not from the Greeks but from the Old Testament. He locates at its heart the silence of Abraham’s secret, the secret of what cannot be said.⁴⁸ Ultimately what Conrad has done in *Heart of Darkness* is create a kind of glow, a ‘white fog’, around an absence, an unspeakable emptiness. T.E. Lawrence, in a letter to David Garnett quoted by Edward Said, says Conrad’s work always ends “‘in a kind of hunger [because he] never says what he wants to say.’” (Said 1966:211) and Conrad seems to support this when he writes in a letter to R.B. Cunninghame Graham: ‘*Somme toute, c’est une bête de histoire qui aurait pu être quelque chose de très bien si j’avais su l’écrire.*’ (Said 1966:201) This may be the case for Conrad’s other novels, but in *Heart of Darkness* the hunger comes

⁴⁸ How can Abraham *speak* his unconditional response to God’s ethically irresponsible (but absolutely responsible in terms of the only relationship possible between God and Man) request to give back to God his gift of Isaac, Abraham’s only legitimate son?

from the recognition of an absence which he has set out to express, and which the structure creates.

Writing to E.V. Lucas, Conrad declares that a “good book is a good action”. (Said 1966: 44) If Conrad’s protagonist, Marlow, is merely a wandering word-spinner in search of some kind of absent, unspeakable truth, it is by writing about Marlow’s search that Conrad acts and his novel about the impossibility of telling his story becomes the site, it literally is the *locus*, the place of a transcendental homelessness which can only, if at all, be fleetingly satisfied in words.

Just as Nabokov’s inter-textual and self-referential post-modernity and, though more nuanced, but similarly self-referential, Hawthorne’s proto-modernist romance, refute Lukács’ claim that only in the realist novel can this expression of metaphysical dispossession take place, so, and especially, does the modernist and fore-runner of the absurd, *Heart of Darkness*. As such I would argue that it can act as a paradigm for those novels which do not fall into the category of straightforward realism, and substantiates my view that all novels not only express transcendental homelessness, but constitute the location of its expression.

7. The insane companion

‘[...] there is a *nostalgia of the soul* when the longing for home is so violent that the soul must, with blind impetuosity, take the first path that seems to lead there.’ (Lukács 1971:87)⁴⁹

If narrators and characters, dragging with them readers, achieve some kind of fleeting revelation – whether of paradise, un-utterable absence or paradise corrupted – can the same be said of the author? Unlike the writer of later modernist novels such as those of Virginia Woolf, or the already cited *nouveau roman*, whose aim is self-effacement, it is apparent these three authors are at ease with the provenance of their books from within their own lives, though they may not be at ease with the originating situation. Conrad for example found the command of a river-boat on the Congo traumatic and relinquished it before the expiry of his contract, and Hawthorne was deeply ambiguous about the beliefs and conduct of his ancestors, while Nabokov could never in anyway condone the Russian revolution.

In the prefaces Hawthorne wrote to *Mosses from the Old Manse* and *The Scarlet Letter* we have what seems extraordinary self-revelation, in the former, of his habitation and in the latter, as we have seen, of his attitude to his native Salem, but they do not reveal the man: ‘These things’, his external habits, his abode, his casual associates, ‘hide the man’, for him ‘You must [...] look through the whole range of his fictitious characters, good and evil, in order to detect any of his essential traits.’ (Nathaniel Hawthorne 1851: iv) Even a search of his work, his whole work, leaves readers with only what they can ‘detect’, rather than what they can know. Once again Hawthorne performs with dexterity the trick he practices on his readers: he repudiates the apparent openness of his prefaces, but doesn’t deny the possibility of the reader coming to know the author.

Whether or not we experience Conrad’s work as a ‘religious rite’, Conrad, with his desire to ‘make us *see*’ does not guard from his readers the fruits of his imagination, for him the most important – sacrosanct – faculty a novelist possesses, which are bound to reveal his deepest ideas and beliefs, though what he writes about himself in memoir and letters may be disingenuous.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ My emphasis.

⁵⁰ Said maintains that Conrad’s account of his life and writing can never be trusted. (Said 1966)

Nabokov's complete and asserted control over his material is positively hostile to the concept of the death of the author. How far what he writes discloses him is, as with Hawthorne, debateable. He too has disavowed the identification of his characters with himself even though many of them – Sebastian Knight, Pnin, Humbert Humbert, Kinbote, Shade, in the English novels, Martin and Godunov-Cherdyntsev, to cite two of his Russian protagonists – carry some of Nabokov's past in theirs.⁵¹ In addition, despite his avowal that by writing *Mary* he has freed himself from his past, all Nabokov's books and his short stories appear to be re-runs of the concerns of his earlier life.

Although the other two writers may not use their lives with quite the obvious double bluff of Nabokov – insisting to the seeker-reader that the person is hiding in this cupboard here, so the seeker-reader goes elsewhere only to discover the hider-writer was in the cupboard all along – the three writers are masters of deception. They hide meaning in allegory and fairy tale, they conceal meaning in complexity of plot and identity, they shroud meaning in inconsequential tales where there is no ostensible truth. They do this to conquer the nostalgia: 'a form of melancholia caused by prolonged absence from one's country or home' (Shorter Oxford Dictionary 1983:1415), which is a corollary of homelessness, and which can so easily slide into sentimentality. Conrad is a paradigm here. Though he may be said to wear his heart on his sleeve, what he constantly writes about is the self-deception of sentimentalism. Sentimentalism may belong with the other gods, 'Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism', which abandon the writer at the 'threshold of the temple' of portraying 'the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world.' (Conrad 1963:13) but his subsequent comment, 'like the poor [it] is exceedingly difficult to get rid of' indicates Conrad's awareness of his own tendency to the sentimental. That these writers became literally homeless and therefore prey to nostalgia is both significant and immaterial.

It is significant because all three have to overcome the predisposition to giving in to the snare and delusion of nostalgia. Conrad does so by pitting what Said terms his 'version of the *homme moyen anglais*, albeit more subtle and perceptive, altogether more European.' (Said 1966:147) against the foolish romanticism of the Russian and the horrid idealism of the Kurtz and Kurtz's Intended. Though Marlow is not Conrad, any more than he is Lord Jim or Kurtz, he is, as I have said, Conrad's touchstone in the fine line between his desire for a society with stable values and his knowledge that humanity is not like that. Conrad

⁵¹ Nabokov says of John Shade: 'He does borrow some of my own opinions.' (Nabokov 1973;1990:18)

might have intended the frame narrator in *Heart of Darkness* to be a ‘decent chap’ and validate Marlow, but the book’s symbols and structure undermine his intention. Conrad identifies by synecdoche the people that Marlow meets on his journey. In similar fashion he labels Marlow’s listeners. These devices serve to make both sets of characters types. While the representatives of rampant Belgian imperialism are portrayed as inane and immoral, those of the British Empire are both more anonymous and dealt with more complexly. It is getting dark and we can’t see them. Coupled with this, and the fact their leader is linked by name – ‘the Director of the Company’ – to Marlow’s employers, is our awareness of the frame narrator’s uncritical hero worship of some of the earlier rapacious ‘knights of the sea’. The description, implied of all the ex-seaman, not just one of them, as the ‘best of old fellows’, who have between them ‘the bond of the sea’, (Conrad 1960:27) becomes devalued and the frame narrator more than unreliable. He becomes suspect. Instead our guide has to be Marlow, of whom the ‘worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class.’ (Conrad 1965:29), that he is an odd outsider, whose admission of his inadequacy – that not even the values of restraint and work can save him from having to make himself party to not telling the truth about Kurtz – shows an understanding of the moral complexity of the world that inclines us to trust him.

This is not to say that a true novel has to be didactic. We have seen in Benjamin that the ‘moral’ is for stories and, as Nabokov observes, novels must not teach lessons. One of the writers Nabokov cites as amongst the ‘rank moralists and didacticists’ (Nabokov 1990:33) is Oscar Wilde, who is also a rank sentimentalist. For Nabokov is only too aware of the dangers. In the introduction to *Mary* he has, he says, because of the insanity of his nostalgia, a ‘sentimental stab’ of ‘attachment’ to his ‘first book’. (Nabokov 1983:10) He avoids the delusive self-pity that accompanies such an emotion in *Pnin* by confronting it head-on. Pnin says of his gold cross: ‘As you well know, I wear it merely for sentimental reasons. And the sentiment is becoming burdensome.’ (Nabokov 2010:111) which is possibly why when we re-encounter Pnin in *Pale Fire* according to Kinbote (though of course Kinbote cannot be trusted to tell the truth) he is a humourless but serene Russian martinet, complete with the now stout white dog, of whom we catch a glimpse when the supposed Gradus is chasing Kinbote, the supposed king of Zembla, around the Wordsmith library. In *Pale Fire* Nabokov deliberately takes nostalgia to insanity. Kinbote’s desperate desire to hold on to his past in Zembla results in delusions, he believes he is King Charles, and in delusional possessiveness. His certainty that, ‘the magnificent Zemblan theme with which I kept furnishing him and which [...] I fondly believed would become the main rich

thread in its weave!(Nabokov 1991:75) leads him at John Shade's death to steal the poem: 'I was holding all Zembla pressed to my heart.' (Nabokov 1991:227) By contrast Pnin and Shade, both of whom in their different ways could be regarded as Nabokov's touchstones, one for his principals, the other for his tenderness and honesty, strive to hold in check the madness of the sorrow that has been apportioned to them (and the whole of humanity).

In Hawthorne the tendency towards sentimentality is checked by his knowledge of all that is nasty in humanity. For the fancies of Hawthorne's imagination are seldom nice. They are frequently and brutally sexual, full of poison and witchcraft – we think of 'Rappacini's Daughter', 'The Birthmark', and 'Egotism; or the Bosom Serpent'. All start innocuously, all end up in death. In *The House of the Seven Gables* his avowed intention was to write something 'sunny' and full of sentiment. He ends up by writing in such a 'fanciful' way with his usual motifs – poisoned waters, grotesque hens and a hero, if he can be called such, connected to everything suspect in popular science – that the 'sunniness' of his heroine, who is all things good, is undermined. His fairy tale ending strikes us as so cavalier and casual that we understand that he realises the impossibility of escaping from the past into a future domestic utopia

While it is significant that Nabokov, Conrad and Hawthorne were either exiled, or self-exiled, from their native land, it is also immaterial. If the condition of every novelist is exile, then the tendency to nostalgia is a danger for every novelist. And nostalgia *is* the danger for every novelist. However much control over the characters, however much she knows the plot and how it changes her protagonists' lives (or vice versa) the novelist can never be certain of avoiding taking the easy way out. The wish to make things come right for them, for her readers, even for herself, of indulging a sentimental desire for meaning is the reverse of the form and content of the novel. It is in the way they consciously struggle to achieve some kind of un-predetermined, unsentimental truth that every novelist can be said not only to be writing a novel but to be located in it.

8. *the shadow of her...*

The construction of my novel through *bricolage*, the putting together of disparate pieces of writing to create a whole, is as I have suggested, almost by definition (if one mentally sets aside a centring agent) an acknowledgement of homelessness, and the indecision over its title, variously: *the shadow of her*, *The Brockenspectre*, *The Frog's Princess*, *The Barn*, *Landscape of her Mind*, during the period of writing and revision is indicative. While indecision is not the prerogative of the exile being unable to decide made me acutely aware of the underlying uncertainty that must be inherent in all exile. How does the exiled novelist – every novelist – respond?

Unlike *Pnin* which has one main protagonist or *The House of the Seven Gables* in which no one character takes the story through, more like *Heart of Darkness*, my novel *The Brockenspectre* centres on two main characters. The novel started out as an anecdote about obsession; in this case the obsession of Hild, a mature student, for an authority figure, Ed. The anecdote was to be explored through the equally obsessive response to Hild of Ed's partner, Miriam, resulting in her delusional attempt to rid herself of Hild by 'writing her out of her life' with a point-of-view exercise. The women are self-exiled, both outsiders to the system. Hild, under-educated for her ability, is desperate for recognition, and Miriam is lonely, having divested herself of country, job and family. They were conceived not as antithetical to each other – this would have been schematic and simplistic, but as like and unlike, in the way that a brockenspectre is both the shadow of, and separate from, the person casting it. Drawn as quite talented, they are insecure for various reasons, some social, some psychological, but their response to this insecurity is different. To compensate, Hild tries to insert herself into and manipulate the society around her, while Miriam responds by separating herself and withdrawing into her past.

My first problem, as I saw it, was that I couldn't let Hild's story dominate that of the less pushy, more restrained Miriam. I decided that instead of having two parallel, but not intersecting narratives, (a possibility suggested by the counterpointing of John Shade's poem and Kinbote's commentary in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*), a single narrative would predominate and this would be Miriam's. As in *Heart of Darkness*, it was a question of not allowing Hild to be heard too clearly. How does Conrad silence Kurtz's magic voice: "He could get himself to believe anything – anything." which even has the owner under its spell? (Conrad 1960:118) For the relationship Marlow has with Kurtz is very dangerous.

Already different in still going to sea, Marlow's love of the empty spaces on the map has led him to a part of colonial Africa where they don't speak English and Marlow has to speak French, making him geographically and linguistically dislocated.⁵² As Ashcroft has observed, 'a major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement.' (Ashcroft et al 1989:8) He continues: 'A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation resulting from migration [...]enslavement [...]transportation, or 'voluntary' removal for indentured labour.' This produces an 'alienation of vision and a crisis in self-image' (Ashcroft et al 1989:9) which is very susceptible to the hypnosis of eloquence.⁵³ Conrad must avoid the danger for Marlow, and the reader, (because we also, by the mere fact of our desire to read make ourselves susceptible to words). For all yarns, which is what Marlow is past master of, have a propensity to the maudlin which results in a skewing of the truth. Consequently Conrad keeps the object of Marlow's (and our) attention out of sight. At the same time, through the legend of his success, he gives Kurtz an aura, and the one image of Kurtz in Marlow's mind (and ours) is of him paddling back up river, heroically (or as we discover later, insanely) eschewing leave and home. He becomes alluring through his *reported* attractiveness, and Marlow's desperate desire to find out if there is an honourable way of being in Africa. We don't actually see him until Marlow arrives at the river station.

When we do see him he is anything but alluring. He is abnormally tall, his 'bony' head linking him symbolically to the skulls of the 'savage' men he has murdered, but, the novel three-quarters over, we are by now on guard. For, despite the thrilling voice Conrad has undercut the glamour with ominous symbol – Kurtz's portrait of the 'blind' girl holding the torch reminds us of Marlow's ferocious irony when he suggests that the only way to go about 'raping' a continent is 'blind' – and with direct commentary on the dubious nature of Kurtz's report. Effectively, Kurtz is silenced by not coming before us until it is too late for him to be able to corrupt us, and it is Marlow's sardonic and disillusioned tone which filters our encounter. Conrad hardly lets Kurtz get a word in edgewise. After considering Conrad's technique, I deleted a first draft of Hild's version of events which might have unbalanced the novel, enlisting too much sympathy because of her deluded optimism in the face of the difficulties of her life, from the other characters and the reader alike. Examples

⁵² This double dislocation is akin to Pnin's – again one wonders how far Nabokov is 'writing back' to Conrad.

⁵³ Jane Grayson suggests it is when Nabokov realises at the outbreak of war he can no longer write in Russian that he acquires 'a biography' and is liberated into his future. (Grayson 2002:8)

of her writing were cut to a minimum and the most significant piece – her account of Hallowe'en at Whitby – was reported rather than taking place directly in the text.

At the same time, though I didn't want her sensational and possibly untrue life history to become the main story, it is Hild's arrival in the college which drives the narrative. The reader has to encounter her because this is not so much a novel about one character avoiding the seduction of the words of another (as Marlow must), as about two characters, Miriam and Hild, having been seduced by words, by what they may bring in the way of constructing the 'valid and active sense of self' that Ashcroft says follows from previous 'dislocation'. Considering the early writers in the American and Canadian colonies, Ashcroft points out that it is as much the self-exiled who have problems in using the old English in order to describe their new world as those who have been deprived of their language by enslavement. Both sets of people have to develop the 'english', as Ashcroft terms it, of the margins in order to 'write back' to the traditional centre, the old world. So though Miriam and Hild have themselves effected their translation from one place to another, they are dislocated, even if in a minor way. Like Pnin they need a refuge and a language to re-create a sense of belonging.

The one chapter in which Pnin, and the reader, are allowed to relax is when he is on vacation. Nabokov transmutes the very recognisable American landscape into a small part of Russia. The food is Russian, the talk is of Russia, and the affection, and animosities, of old, old colleagues and friends are re-experienced. Here, where Pnin speaks his own language with authority, his love and sorrow for Myra Belochkin's death in a concentration camp are fully revealed, his stature and his humanity increase and any mocking – he swims for two minutes like a 'giant frog' at the swimming hole – comes to us through friendly eyes, and is more gentle. The respite is temporary. As we have seen, Nabokov undercuts any cosiness and sense of sanctuary with his import of the modern in the Americanised offspring of the émigrés, and the animals and plants – despite the fabulousness of, to Varvara, the foreign bestiary, the porcupine, skunk and humming bird, and the poison ivy clasped to her about-to-be-more pink and freckled bosom – are also one hundred percent American. Later in the novel when Pnin, partially adopted by America, begins to believe he can reinvent his home there, Nabokov will not indulge his naivety and he is forced to leave the campus.

After leaving the Liverpool of what she claims was her abused childhood, Hild lives on an estate of high-rises bedevilled by torched cars in a Leeds she hates. She discovers in Whitby her 'special place', and in the small campus town she finds 'everything [she] needs', including the support she constantly seeks. Ultimately both refuges prove to be illusory. Hild's effort to locate herself fraudulently in other people's lives, especially, and in particular, that of her 'saviour', Ed, based as it is on a misreading, wilful or not, of the actual situation, must also be disabused. First in the unspecified incident at Hallowe'en she finds Whitby more frightening than sheltering. Then because her parasitical endeavour to situate herself is, we are informed, a frequently repeated, and probably dishonest, action, she too is forced to leave her campus. Unlike Pnin her departure is without any sense (for the reader) that she understands what she has done: she remains self-delusional.

Miriam, possessing the narrative voice is ostensibly the heroine of *The Brockenspectre*, but as with Marlow whom we hesitate to call a hero, and whom she resembles in her constant seeking for something she knows not what, so also we hesitate to apply the term heroine to her. Although her decision to join Ed at the college acknowledges a desire for a new life, she doesn't lay claim to any particular place or any particular group of people apart from Ed. Miriam's memoir represents the need to relive the past, the dangerous impulse to nostalgia. Refusing to entrust herself to the present means she too cannot be allowed to remain in college. However when we return to the originating scenes, with Marlow on the Thames and Miriam in the wintry landscape of the fells, it is her acknowledgement of the situation, without any sentimental optimism, which suggests that, like Marlow, Miriam has learnt something about herself and her relationship to the world.

My second problem was that though to avert the possibility of her taking over the novel I wanted to silence Hild, I felt uneasy at casting her as purely manipulative, in the way that Conrad does Kurtz. It is the same kind of unease that Nabokov feels about casting Pnin as a purely comic figure, and that Hawthorne seems to feel about Hepzibah. Hawthorne's initial description is full of a cruel mockery, but by the end of the novel Hepzibah's devotion to her brother, and her stalwart if timid defence of him, even to the point of running away with him after the death of Judge Pyncheon, has engendered some respect in narrator and reader. Paradoxically, in order to avoid turning Kurtz into a figure of pure gothic melodrama, which would be risible, Conrad renders the threat null and void by over-dramatising his appearance. Hild, conceived of as almost gothic in her manipulation, is certainly (and quite unintentionally) very nearly so in her appearance. However like the

characters in *The House of the Seven Gables* who, though either caricatured or idealised, are not gothic despite certain grotesque aspects (though their surroundings are), I intended her to have a reality that meant she *had to be seen* if she was to have a fair chance. In case things got out of hand, and with the aim of countering any imbalance of hostility on the part of Miriam or Hild for each other, and from the reader to either, I decided to bring in a corrective voice, first person plural, representing the relative impartiality and disinterestedness of the college. Additionally I thought the 'we' of the quasi-omniscient commentator would draw the reader into the community of which it was representative, in effect making the reader also arbiter of Miriam's and Hild's actions. This seemed to work well, until I noticed that the voice was becoming more and more connected to the increasingly frequent appearance of the college Principal. I didn't want another main character, which is what she was threatening to become, as I felt this would dissipate the relationship between Miriam and Hild, so I turned the choric 'we' into a series of memos from the college Principal, named – Francesca Farrington – but now unseen. Like Hawthorne's narrator she is never embodied.

Despite the anonymity and detachment of the official language the memos employed, it became obvious that the form couldn't bear the burden either of the amount, or of the intimate nature, of the information to be imparted. They no longer read like memos. In the end I turned the majority, which had initially been fully portrayed scenes in direct speech between on the one hand, Francesca Farrington and the senior members of the college, and on the other Francesca Farrington and Hild, into reported action. Although this created problems of the show/tell variety, what was more interesting was the effect of reducing the memos to two. While the first memo foreshadows possible problems to come, the second becomes a judgement, and a harsh one, on the two women. What neither of these utterances from central authority has is the disinterested, impartial, but not unsympathetic tone I had envisaged, the type of choric comment which obtains in the tragedies of Sophocles. Rather they are self-interested, protecting a not very strong organization from a threat to its stability. In a sense the memos, but especially the second, sent out following the penultimate crisis between Hild and Miriam, which recommends Hild should re-establish herself elsewhere and Miriam not be awarded a new contract, become an indictment of the institution as represented by Ed and Francesca Farrington, Jeff, English lecturer, and Nicola, photographic tutor.

This indictment is emphasised by the final scene between Miriam and Hild, and its aftermath, when we see that the college has betrayed both women's naive trust. Using the excuse that the memo is confidential, a confidentiality he has been willing to break in the past, Ed hasn't told Miriam of the decision that has been made about her employment. Nor, does he overcome his distaste and support her, his partner and lover, after her attack on Hild. Nor, as staff member with a pastoral role, does he come to Hild's rescue – that is left to one of the students. In a minor vein, but nonetheless underlining the college's attitude, Jeff and Nicola also fail the women. Jeff, Hild's chief academic link to the college, should have been firm with Hild as an already weak student. Instead, he almost seems to collude with her by allowing her to participate in the mummer's play that leads to her erroneous, and fallacious, unmasking of Ed as her lover. Nicola, who Miriam thought was a friend with similar slightly unconventional views as herself, aligns herself with the authorities. She reprimands Miriam, in the conformist language of Dr Farrington, the voice of the establishment, declaring that the masked ball that Miriam has organized is tedious and frustrating. Because of the college's attitude, by the end of the novel, though the obsession and the antagonism in the relationship between Hild and Miriam remains, it is altered, which was my intention in the first place. Neither is completely in the wrong nor is either in the right. They gain, what their fixation had previously forbidden, a more rounded reality which is consequently subtracted from the other characters. These become in turn the supporting cast – the chorus – but without the chorus' moral authority.⁵⁴ Hild's and Miriam's departures from the college are as much a judgement on the establishment made by the author, the two main protagonists, and the reader, as it is on Hild's dishonesty and Miriam's refusal to commit.

A major aspect of my novel which relates to all three novels I have discussed is the use of time and memory. In Chapter 2, 'Constructing a novel: *bricolage* and biography', I said that I used elements of my own experience as a source of Miriam's, (South American scenes, school), and, to a more limited extent, (Leeds estate, Liverpool school, Whitby), Hild's, life stories. In that sense I am like Conrad, whose experiences as the master of a Congo riverboat are the source and the stimulus of his tale. However, as Ian Watt has pointed out, although Conrad has used the form of story, that is, the voice of the story

⁵⁴ This failure of the choral voice illuminates Lukács' view that tragedy (Greek), coming at the cusp of ancient and modern times, while it operates out of the tragic hero's individual fate and hubris (whereas the epic hero is typical rather than individual) does so within an accepted moral framework. In a relativist universe a strong and unambiguous chorus is not possible which substantiates his contention that the next development in prose, the novel, arises from a need to seek out a values system.

teller, to introduce and narrate the *Heart of Darkness* ““And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the dark places on earth.”” (Conrad 1960:29) what he is giving us is not, as Conrad says of *Youth* in his Author’s note, the ‘reminiscent tenderness’ that obtains in it, but ‘memory [as] the means for depicting an intense confrontation of Marlow’s past with his present’ (Watt 1980: 211). I cannot claim such a confrontation for Miriam, because the narration of Miriam’s past is not located in a single traumatic episode. Nor can I claim with Hawthorne an attempt to eradicate the sins of the fathers, Pyncheon and Maule, brought down on the heads of the sons and daughters. Though Miriam endeavours, and fails, to eliminate Hild by writing her out of her life, and though she is obviously exiled from her parents and her homeland, her memoir represents an effort not so much at annulling the past as at regaining it as heritage for the present. Her history, ostensibly written for her children, is in fact her way of acquiring and defining a self. This is closer to Nabokov, but is in no way Nabokov’s fusion of a longed for past life with present moment, in order to hold at bay a future which can only be death. Nearly all Miriam’s memoir can be read discretely and ‘my mother bought a dog once’ has the quality of reminiscence that almost makes it an oral tale. However, even if her short story, ‘The Frog’s Princess’, does not release her from Hild, Miriam’s stories of her early life, taken together, constitute her biography. This creates in Miriam the valid sense of self that, coupled with Ed’s seemingly greater regard for the needs of the college rather than her own, leads not just to the failure of her and Ed’s relationship, but to her independence.

Despite Benjamin’s and Lukács’ declaration of the centrality of time to the novel does this preoccupation with the past – confronting it, denying it, regaining it, and using it to build a biography, a self – lead to stasis? Related to this is the question as to whether the shadow-image, present in one guise or another in all the novels, produces a similarly static inevitability?

As I have noted, like Marlow and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, in *The Brockenspectre* Hild is presented not as Miriam’s *alter ego* nor yet as her *doppelganger*. Marlow, in his mission to civilise his listeners out of their complacency, relates the tale of a journey during which he has to recognise not only his enduring kinship with his dying African helmsman, but also with the racist but atavistic Kurtz. A reader of *Heart of Darkness* can almost believe it is not Kurtz who says, ‘The horror, the horror,’ but Marlow, recognising the ease with which duty dies and restraint fails. Where Marlow fears he could become Kurtz, Miriam fears Hild wants to be Miriam. Although Hild is manipulative and possibly predatory, as

the object of Miriam's obsession, she is both real and a figment of Miriam's imagination. As such she is an inescapable part of Miriam's mind. When Miriam realises this she acknowledges not only their actual similarities – homeless, insecure, ambitious, and resistant to authority – but that, as she is 'made-up' by, she is also a part of, Miriam's make-up. Hawthorne presents us with an analogous situation. While Hepzibah and Clifford are near-caricatures of the effect of the sins of greed and fantasy, Judge Pyncheon is almost a carbon copy of his kinsman the Colonel, it is in Holgrave and Phoebe, his most symbolic, and consequently in some ways his least credible, characters, that Hawthorne presents the linked images – they are the nearly positive daguerreotypes of the negative Maule ancestor and Alice Pyncheon – which suggest an accommodation with reality.⁵⁵ Only in *Pnin* do we have a character which opposes all the other characters in the novel: Pnin, the genuine stepfather to Eric Wind's false father; Pnin, the true lover to the narrator's sham love; Pnin the real comedian to Jack Cockerell's tasteless parody. Does this opposition also lead to stasis, as the shadow-image, in its various guises, seems to do?

I have identified stasis as a significant feature in both the scene and structure of *Heart of Darkness*, and *Pnin*, while the inability to escape the results of former actions is the theme of Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*.⁵⁶ If so how do I link the concept of stasis with the concept of the errant that I regard as central to the novel as the site of transcendental homelessness?⁵⁷ Is there a sense in which stasis is inevitable – there can be no forward movement if there is no transcendent home to move to? For early Lukács, though God is neither dead nor illogical, he is *absent* from the world. It is a serious absence – he doesn't envisage the existence of a new 'God' in the near future (though he yearns for a 'God' who would be expressed in the bourgeois epic, the novel). Himself permanently exiled, he may have gone on to make Marxism into an alternative belief system, as Neubauer claims, but, as with Bakhtin, the earlier work in *The Theory of the Novel* conjectures and accommodates a permanent exile.⁵⁸ The purpose implicit in the idea of a forward movement is at odds with the absence posited. No, the paradox is that this exile is both static and forever seeking a home. It is a kind of fictional no-man's-land.

⁵⁵ One critic has likened Judge Pyncheon to a 'shape-shifter', a particular and sinister form of ghost, one of many in Hawthorne's work. (Michelson 1984)

⁵⁶ Stasis has been suggested of Nabokov's characters. (Nabokov 1990:94)

⁵⁷ Said locates the use of static scene setting in other Conrad's novels and short stories. (Said 1966: 94)

⁵⁸ Neubauer writes: 'If [...] Bakhtin developed his theory of the novel by refiguring *transcendental* homelessness into *linguistic* homelessness, this was primarily because by disposition he was more willing and able to live in "permanent exile," without a sheltering community, than Lukács.' (Neubauer 1996:532)

Returning to my question at the beginning of this chapter how does the novelist deal with the painful uncertainty of exile? Nabokov gives three choices – ecstasy, extreme delusion or irony. Of his characters the ones who react to exile through ecstasy or extreme delusion are destroyed or, like Pnin, continue to exist in an idealised, unwritten, future world. Only the ironist, such as Chateau is revealed to be in his comment on Pnin's describing his attacks of nostalgia as 'a shadow behind the heart' – 'Good title for a bad novel' (Nabokov 2010:109) – has come to terms with the reality of exile.⁵⁹ For Hawthorne exile is resolved in the response of a character like Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* who makes some kind of positive out of living a life of selfless duty on the physical and spiritual outskirts of her community. The two characters in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* who suffer actual exile – Hepzibah from the society she belongs to, and her brother Clifford, incarcerated and falsely shamed for a crime he didn't commit – are twisted by and, at best, endure it. After their rescue by death and money they live on, but in a weakened state of dependency, in a home that is not their home. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow exists neither within nor outside his class and his country – his name, iconically, is that of a town on the Thames but without the 'e' – and subsists not out of any faith, or magic, but out of a bleak will to survival through the dedication to work that he first recognises in himself and others in *Youth*, 'What made them do it – what made them obey me, when I, consciously thinking how fine it was, made them drop the bunt of the foresail twice to try and do it better?' (Conrad 1946:28)

But, 'No one can help the exile.' (Nabokov 1991:47) They remain in exile. Pnin's excruciatingly painful recall of his past leads to his refusal to be complicit in a corrupt present. He gives up his hope of a house and the illusion of security. In *The House of the Seven Gables* the inheritance of gold is exposed as 'fairy tale' by the revelation of the spring behind the portrait which brings to Hepzibah and the reader an understanding of the way Clifford's foolish romances, his 'fancies' have deluded both himself and his brutal cousin. Marlow's lie to the Intended is the culmination of the self-knowledge his journey has brought him: he too is implicated in the moral and verbal void represented by Kurtz. Miriam futilely and superstitiously crosses her fingers, wishing she could, but knowing she can't, escape Hild. These renunciations of fantasy may seem to be the reverse of regaining the transcendental home, but all comprise recognition of reality. The moment when the protagonist achieves the bridging of the chasm between what life ought to be and what life

⁵⁹ It's interesting that Nabokov makes him a practicing Greek Catholic, pained by Pnin's agnosticism. Pnin has to be agnostic otherwise he couldn't partake of the paradise that is the only paradise Nabokov can offer, the coming together of past and present in fiction.

is, represents not so much stasis as moments of rest before the search starts again – in this or another novel.

9. 'A pogodia...': 'And yet...' (Grayson 2002)

In her introduction to *Nabokov's World Vol. 1: The shape of Nabokov's World*, Jane Grayson quotes from the final paragraph of an unpublished sequel of Nabokov's *The Gift*: 'In autumn war broke out. He returned to Paris. The end of everything. Tragedy of the Russian writer.' But this is not quite the end. The last two words are: 'A pogodia ...': 'And yet ...' (Grayson 2002:8) Despite his apparent despair Nabokov finds a way out. He realises that, unlike his fellow émigrés, he is not trapped in his mother tongue. He can write in English, and to do so represents an opportunity. However much he mourns the loss of his old language, he becomes almost a parasite in the new, maybe resenting, but certainly taking sustenance from it. Further she reiterates her view that despite the leap, whether of faith or desperation, that Nabokov had to make when deciding to change his medium, it was 'the example of Pushkin's cultural eclecticism which helped him maintain his point of balance [...] and in America he no longer resisted the multi-culturalness of his make-up. He positively rejoiced in it.' (Grayson 2002:9-10). The enforced use of a foreign language and the giving-in to a multi-lingual intellectual heritage paradoxically leads to his most complex writing.

Two aspects of this discussion are relevant. Firstly there is the recognition that inheriting some form of multi-culturalism – call it *bricolage* – of upbringing can confer autonomy. If the construction of a novel by *bricolage* represents freedom from what Graham Greene called the tyranny of the plot, the 'abiding temptation to tell a good story' (Greene 1968:49), the construction of the self by *bricolage* is liberation from having to be one kind of person. Both positions can be dangerous – they can lead to indeterminacy – but as Said comments, Conrad's indeterminist view of experience and time are the well springs of his creation (Said 1966:11).

The second aspect relates to the words, 'And yet'. I want to ask: And yet is it right to claim that novels are the site of transcendental homelessness? Should I have explored Frank O'Connor's view that the short story reveals quintessentially the loneliness of the outsider?⁶⁰ Associated with this I want to raise again the possibility that the novels I have examined – accorded that status by most readers, if not by their authors – are not in fact novels. Maybe Lukács is right – maybe they aren't, and maybe my novel isn't either. Thirdly, a question I

⁶⁰ This is a fascinating possibility, but I would claim that loneliness does not necessarily come from homelessness, nor is homelessness necessarily lonely.

asked myself when I first set out to write *The Brockenspectre* was: can one, in a novel, write a story which never ends, in the way the many strands involved in a single life end only at death? “Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end?” Italo Calvino asks. (Calvino 1992:259)

To take the last question first. The answer according to Benjamin and Lukács is ‘no’. Stories, oral ones, depend on reminiscence and can be repeated, novels because they are dependent on the biography of a protagonist must have a beginning in her life, and an end in her death, whether actual or simply the end of the book. This is the case in all four novels. Though Marlow and Pnin reappear in other books, though a new existence is envisaged for the characters of *The House of the Seven Gables*, and Hild it seems will always be with Miriam, that particular life – the one recounted in each of these novels – has finished, is dead and gone. Accompanying this conclusion is the realisation that the *pattern* sought by Miriam *can* only occur in novels. It is not possible in real life, because the ‘livyer’, the person living on this earth, however in control she thinks she is, cannot shape her life according to her will; or, if she concurs with the idea of a transcendental ‘shaper’, a ‘god’ in some form, the patterning, perforce, is unknown to her.⁶¹

Are the novels I have chosen to discuss – a romance, a group of short stories, and a novella – atypical? Is my novel, created by *bricolage*, atypical? Does their tendency towards stasis invalidate their claim to be novels? The question is illumined by a consideration of Lukács ‘entertainment’, the novel’s ‘caricatural twin’. An examination of Georges Simenon’s *Maigret’s Mistake* shows that something different goes on in the former, and it is not simply the quality of the writing. After two and a half lines of setting, the action opens with this:

‘At the window, Mme Maigret was peering through the fog at the passers-by, who were hurrying to work, shoulders hunched and hands in pockets.

‘You’d better put on your heavy overcoat,’ she said.

For it was by watching people in the street that she decided what the weather was like.’ (Simenon 1954:153)

Now, however much I may enjoy reading Simenon’s *Maigret* series, to do so is to be immersed in what James Wood somewhat dogmatically dismisses as the tired old realism inherent to crime and spy fiction – the odd detail thrown to the reader so she can locate herself. The first sentence bears Wood out. ‘It was eight twenty-five in the morning when

⁶¹ ‘Livyer’ – term used by Miriam in *The Brockenspectre* to describe people who have grown up in and remained in an area.

Maigret rose from the breakfast table, still drinking his last cup of coffee.’ (Simenon 1954:153) Neither pin-pointing the time, ‘eight twenty-five in the morning’, nor the place, ‘the breakfast table’, nor the action, ‘still drinking’, nor the quantity imbibed, one of several cups of coffee, though these details are the real aspects of the everyday, brings the book to life. Yet what Simenon does next is something that arrests us. In a Flaubertian moment, he segues seamlessly from omniscient narrator into Mme Maigret’s point of view, and thereby into her mind and character. In one sentence: ‘For it was by watching [...]’, he lifts the novel out of the familiar and unchallenging into the ‘real’. Immediately following this, the omniscient narrator reverts to form and we no longer have entry into Mme Maigret’s character, nor the everyday life of the Maigret household. While the sentence which catches our attention proves that the novel is not the only kind of writing to have the moments akin to the ‘thisness’ which Wood so craves for a new realism, they cannot lift the entertainment out of its predictable structure. Adventure stories, detective stories, chick lit may raise our curiosity as to what happens next – in the sense of ‘devouring’ the plot they seem to be novels – but they do not raise questions. The reader knows in advance that whether or not Maigret rights his mistake (on this occasion he doesn’t) he will unravel the problem of ‘whodunit’. It could be argued that modern examples of such books have greater psychological depth, more ambiguous morality, than before. At best, this is possibly the case, but once there is a puzzle to solve the world of such a book is determined – by its past, by a given political system, by a value system, even where compromised and corrupted. In fact you cannot write an entertainment *without* a set of predetermined values.

Recently Graham Greene’s ‘treatment’, the novella or long short story, *No Man’s Land*, what he termed one of his ‘entertainments’, was rediscovered.⁶² Occupying the metaphorical and physical space between the ideologies of Communism and Catholicism in the Harz Mountains, superficially *No Man’s Land* appears to be a novel. A comparison with *Heart of Darkness* is revealing.⁶³ The characters, plot, structure and location are similar to those of Conrad’s. In an emptied landscape, an Englishman, Brown, is waiting for a report to be brought. The agent not arriving, he goes to find both it and him. There is a frame narrator whose values are undercut by the action and behaviour of the protagonist.

⁶² In his Foreword, David Lodge notes that Greene’s treatments ‘are formally indistinguishable from his short stories’. (Lodge 2005:viii)

⁶³ The number of coincidences that occurred while writing *The Brockenspectre* and this thesis was remarkable. See Appendix 3 ‘A note on Coincidences’.

There is a foreign antagonist, Captain Starhov, who is both like and unlike the hero.⁶⁴ A feeling of stasis pervades the book. There the similarities end. For, though Greene so feared Conrad's influence that he ceased to read him until he was doing the research in the Congo for *A Burnt Out Case*, the difference between the two novellas, is striking. In *No Man's Land*, trust is betrayed and men are killed, but nothing actually changes, for it is *a given* in this type of fiction that murder and betrayal must happen. I have suggested that the stasis of *Heart of Darkness* and the other works is the result of the inability, except at instants, to reach the unknown transcendental home which is object of the novel's search. It is not the stasis of a debate about how to reach a known good or avoid a known bad. By calling his book *No Man's Land* Greene might have wanted to indicate a site of endless wandering with no possible outcome, but, despite discovering that a Communist, Captain Starhov, can be a human, whatever Brown is looking for, the answer is God – the Catholic God.

By naming his lesser works 'entertainments', Greene recognised their debt to genres such as the crime and spy story. His 1968 review of Kim Philby's *My Silent War* recognises clearly the characteristics of the spy and of certain types of religious. Philby had: 'a chilling certainty in the correctness of his judgement'. (Greene 1970:311) No matter what he asserts about their lack of a 'moral' quality, his entertainments are based on certainties, even where they portray characters mauled by doubt, which is borne out by both the title and text of Ian Thomson's review of the novella, 'God beneath the banalities'. In it he observes that one reason why Carol Reed may not have turned the commissioned treatment into film is because Greene is determined 'to spot God' beneath 'life in communist East Germany'. (Thomson 2005:1) This clear difference, where what looks like the content of the novel – the search – is also its form, is not found in the entertainment.

⁶⁴ James Sexton's introduction to *No Man's Land* makes clear that Greene owes a considerable and conscious debt to Turgenev. However it is perhaps Greene's unintentional debt to Conrad which engages me here.

10. Conclusion:

‘I must choose my last life, my new life...’ (Barthes 1986)

Although according to Lukács the ‘very matter’ of the novel ‘is seeking and failing to find the essence’. (Lukács 1971:122) I claim something further for the novel.⁶⁵ It is because it is the place of the quest for the ideal home, (conceived of as transcendental because the idea of it is both desirable and almost unreachable), that it allows the possibility of attaining that home, however fleetingly. To transliterate the words of Calvino’s professor from reading to writing: “Writing is going toward something that is about to be, and no one yet knows what it will be...” (Calvino 1992:72) is to give us some idea of the way in which the reader, the writer, the protagonist of the novel are in an arena in which nothing – no action, no ideal, is pre-determined.

If we picture the novel as a game of Blind Man’s Bluff, then in the inscribed biography of the Blind Man’s search, what he (and through him the reader and the novelist) grasps might be an angel, a person, or thin air. Whatever is grasped is held but fleetingly. Once identified the hunter unmasks, the quarry takes her place and the hunt goes on until ended by the judge. Hild unmasks herself literally, and metaphorically, by her self-deluding declaration of the love for her of her latest ‘saviour’, Ed. Goaded beyond endurance, Miriam physically, and metaphorically, reveals herself as she assaults Hild. The author, whoever she may be, wherever she is, dismisses them to continue their search: the one for yet another delusive saviour in which to make a home, the other for yet another place to make her ‘self’. What makes works of fiction novels rather than entertainments, short stories, epics, or dramas, and accounts both for their seeming stasis and the ambiguity of their endings, is the fact that they are the sites for such a never-ending seeking.

At the start of this thesis I remarked that in *In Comunicado* I discovered that I wanted to be a teller of stories. By this I did not mean that I want to be a short story writer or an oral storyteller, but that I wish to write novels in which story predominates. I think my next venture in the site of the novel might take the form suggested by Calvino: ‘the desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories, without trying to impose a philosophy of life on you, simply allowing you to observe its own growth, like a tree, an entangling, as if of branches and leaves’. Calvino (1992:92) If ‘Art always says ‘And yet’ to life’, (Lukács 1971:72) then taking my cue from Barthes’ essay on Proust, I must choose my ‘last life’, because

⁶⁵ My emphasis

‘for the subject who writes [...] there can be no “new life,” [...] except in the discovery of a new practice of writing.’ (Barthes 1986:286)

Appendix 1

Swallows

The headmistress of the New Forest primary school called us her swallows. For a few years we arrived in April and left in September. We were all permanently slightly tanned and very often too thin, apart from my solid square brother, the childish fat melted from our bones by the African sun. One day the owner of the village ironmonger stopped my mother and me to say of me,

‘Poor little maid, she looks as if she has come from Belsen.’

There were several of us swallows, children who skimmed the surface of life in assorted colonies, and returned to encounter each other for four or five months on the surface of the life of the village. Offcomers in Africa, and offcomers in the New Forest. Later we were offcomers in Uruguay, Shanghai, Syria – and in Reading, Woking and Basingstoke. One day I counted up all the schools I had attended, primary and secondary. There had been eleven, of which the nicest was the English primary. Once a week we went out of the gate, over the road and onto the Forest for a walk, collecting frog and toad spawn, picking buttercups and water forget-me-nots. It was called nature study, but all we did was draw the jars full of our trophies ranged along the window sills of the classroom.

According to my head mistress, my brother and I were, of all the swallows, the most stable: least given to temper tantrums, nail biting, bedwetting, and suffering from facial tics and nightmares. And indeed my memories of my early childhood are sunlit. Standing in the colonnade of the Omar Khayyam Hotel in Cairo, or perhaps Alexandria, or somewhere in Egypt in the late afternoon, my back warm, my feet cool on the marble floor. My mother is giving me castor oil, but I don’t seem to mind. Sitting under a thorn tree by the truck, chewing on guinea fowl drumsticks and spooning cold baked beans for lunch, wearing only a pair of dungarees, the straps slipping off my bare shoulders, and a pith helmet, and there is an immensity of light and space in front of me. Dancing on the mossy lawn in front of the cottage in the Forest, the beech trees at the top of the paddock outlined by the setting sun.

I was six when we left Africa and until then I didn’t wear shoes. We wore gumboots in England if it was cold or wet, but I don’t remember wearing anything in Africa. Perhaps we wore sandals at school. We didn’t see snow until we, or rather I, was seven. We were living in a villa on the Via Cassia in Rome. It had stone floors and one big fireplace was our only heating. It was the coldest winter for many years, so cold that we had to share a bed with my parents to keep warm. One night it snowed. The garden was

steep, and my brother and I excited by this unknown whiteness went out at dawn running up and down the slope in our pyjamas with nothing on our feet.

I was born in Khartoum, Sudan, on the fourth of April, nineteen forty-seven. I should have been an April Fool's baby, but managed to avoid it, despite the flow of letters and telegrams from my alcoholic grandfather urging my arrival. My mother met my father on his first home leave after the war; his first leave for seven years in fact. They went out to dinner three times and then my father sailed back to Africa to continue growing rice and sugar-cane. Shortly afterwards my mother, against my grandfather's advice, 'You're being a fool', sailed to Port Sudan and married him on the twelfth of April nineteen forty-six in Khartoum Cathedral. Her maid of honour was someone she met on the trip out. Wearing a powder blue marocain two piece, and a small brown hat with a blue ostrich feather, she was given away by a friend of my father and the wedding breakfast for sixty guests was arranged by the head of his department.

My father's wedding present to her was a stallion, so that they could ride out into the country before breakfast from the bungalow in Malakal where they first set up home and where my father decided in anticipation of his marital status to paint the concrete bath. He got half-way along and then ran out of time. It remained half painted till the day they left Malakal. It was there that my 'boy', the one who took care of me when my parents went to Khartoum for three weeks for my brother's birth, saved me, as a crawling baby, from being stung by a scorpion. He stamped on it with his large black foot, my mother frozen with panic watching in the dressing table mirror.

My memories start in Khartoum. I remember our bungalow with the two bedrooms and the bathroom in between. The water from the bath ran out into the vegetable garden where bananas, watermelon and okra grew. It was in the bath that my brother and I, stripped naked by my mother, ate mangoes, were sluiced off, and re-clothed. The lavatory was a sand bucket. Every night I heard the camel cart creak to a stop and the camel cart man slide the bucket out through the hole behind the lavatory and slide a clean one back in.

At the back, running the length of the bungalow outside my parent's bedroom, the sitting room and the dining room was a verandah which I think was caged in mosquito wire and where when it did rain, we 'swam' up and down on our stomachs. Beyond the verandah was a lawn bounded by an irrigation ditch. On the bank above grew gum trees. When the garden was flooded we paddled and splashed and I baked mud pancakes, and flour salt and water pills, which I fed to my trusting little brother, though he says it was force-feeding. Every afternoon we rested on our iron bedsteads in the shadowed bedroom

we shared, and I practiced my flying. I flew from the top of the cupboard across the wide tiled floor on to my bed and never once crash-landed.

Our life was punctuated by going on trek. Camp beds, camp stoves, linen, the ‘trek silver’, the ‘boys’, Abdul the cook and my brother and I were packed into the back of the truck, my mother and father in the front and we would set off to inspect my father’s various projects. We were away for two or three weeks staying in the mud-walled thatched Government rest houses, the lavatory at the bottom of the garden, more scary than the one in Khartoum, another round mud-walled hut enclosing a deep insect-infested hole in the ground.

I have one other memory of going on trek. We stopped in one day at a District Officer’s house. It was very, very hot and there was a dark green swimming pool. My brother, who was about four and a half, at once fell in, and learnt to swim. I seem to remember having to wait until I’d put on a swimming costume. This surprises me because my parents were very casual about what we wore – usually just a pair of shorts made by my mother. In that bachelor household I first became aware, with resentment, of being the opposite, unprivileged, sex. Of being a girl.

Back in Khartoum we played with the twins and the baby next door, crawling back and forth through a hole in the fence. One day we strung the baby, who shared my name, from one of the trees. Fortunately her mother found her in time and cut her down.

We must have been in Khartoum at Christmas, though I don’t remember one, but I remember Ramadan. Not the fast but the eid, when we woke in the morning to find caravans of pink sugar camels from stallion to baby, left on our chest of drawers by Abdul, to celebrate its ending. They were too perfect to eat, so we licked them until the ants got to them and they had to be thrown away.

I just remember the riots, when no-one came to evacuate us because we were neither military nor diplomats, but not my mother arguing on the phone with some official. There was nothing to be done, and we had to wait behind locked doors until my father returned from yet another trek. Sometime later we were taken to the performance of a puppet play. I sat in the dark on the prickly grass and stared as the witch lit by flaring kerosene lamps cavorted in the booth, terrified, unable to comprehend the other children’s squeals and laughter. My mother had to take me away.

In 1953 Sudan regained its independence and we left and somehow our childhood was never as sunlit again. We might have been swallows flying to and from Africa according to the seasons, but after we left even those rhythms, that pattern was broken.

My memory and the dates no longer tally; somewhere a year, two years gets lost. I suspect now that we spent some time in England, while my father worked away, and my mother was treated for an illness which was never mentioned or explained, but finally became the agoraphobia which shut her safely in her house for the last twenty-seven years of her life.

We returned to our New Forest cottage, the daffodil orchard in front, the bluebell copse behind, the summer Queen Elizabeth was crowned and watched the coronation on the television that my grandmother had hired, and were given little silver coaches driven by teams of miniature horses. And then we must have gone to Rome.

In Rome we first lived in a hotel where my brother and I played cricket in the corridors, and were sent to school with the nuns, which I remember being warm and sunny and I loved. Three weeks later we moved to the villa on the Via Cassia and went the British School. We visited the Castel St Angelo, where my brother was rescued by a stranger, clutching at his disappearing ankles, from rushing head first down a rubbish chute and out over the castle walls, or so he says. As we walked along the broad pavement beside the River Tiber we ate ice cold strips of coconut. In Rome we lived next door to a Dutch family. On St Nicholas' Eve we copied our friends and put shoes on the windowsill, hopefully but without their anticipation, and were delighted and astonished next day to find in them sweets and little toys.

About the age of nine or ten we sailed aboard the *SS Alcantara* for Argentina. We lived in Buenos Aires on the wrong side of the railway tracks. The other expatriates and the Anglo-Argentineans did not live down those muddy roads on the outskirts of the city. Not only did we live in the wrong place, but we had as car, a jeep. My mother loathed Argentina, the house, the recalcitrant jeep and my father's extended absences in the Camp supervising his projects. Looking back now I can see it may have been in Buenos Aires that my mother began not only not to cope with living abroad, but not to want to cope.

We went to a bilingual school; we were taught Spanish in the morning – and stood each day to salute the Argentinean flag – and English in the afternoon. Our isolation drove my brother into making friends with the local garage mechanics, with whom he sat and gossiped and drank maté. Me it drove to books and I learnt to read and read and read. Even to read the incomprehensible, to me, love story of Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton.

Argentina was significant in another way. Now we were no longer colonials and didn't have home leave, we had to go on holiday. We went twice. Once to the seaside, at Nicosia. There on the windy, gritty, beach below the Rambla, we ate fresh peach sorbets in cornets and dressed in little ponchos, had photos taken of us sitting on llamas. The other

time was to Rucamalen, to a hotel beside a lake high up in the Andes, where my brother and I spent all day riding on horses which stopped dead as soon as we dropped the reins, while my mother fished, and I suppose my father botanised.

The lake was indented with little sandy coves knobbed by tree roots, where we had barbecues with food rowed in by my mother and father. In the woods behind we looked for the wild strawberries that were made into jam or compôt every morning.

One day my father, my brother and I rode up above the tree line where there was just nude rock, very beautiful, very thirsty because there were no streams and we had no water with us.

When we returned to England we were sent to boarding school. I went to a stage and ballet school where I discovered I disliked performing, pilchards, sugared tea and crocodile walks in the sandy-pined countryside of Surrey. What I really hated was being separated from my parents and my loss of freedom. For the last time in my life I wept in front of my mother. I begged to be taken away, and because I wasn't a boy and my education didn't matter, I went to Uruguay, leaving behind my equally unhappy brother.

In Montevideo, in a modern suburb, Carrasco, I lived from when I was just twelve to when I was thirteen and a quarter. It was the transitional year between childhood and adolescence, and my memory becomes adult and clear. I had a best friend, also called Caroline, whose hobby was keeping tarantulas in jam jars in her bedroom.

Together we went to the British School, along with all the other expatriate children who were mostly American, and with whom I had patriotic arguments. But the British children could only just recognize Winston Churchill's voice and we didn't know our national anthem. Although I read Dickens, which is what the school library contained, my other reading was American: comics and children's books about the Hardy boys and Nancy Drew.

In Montevideo I went on my last holiday before I became an adult, a three week trip to the Falklands during which I was relentlessly seasick and fell in love at a distance with a young American sailor with startlingly sad blue eyes, being returned under guard to his ship. The Falklands were a series of isolated sheep farms, where the *SS Darwin* offloaded stores and loaded up with sheep. They were lovely and windswept. Ten years later teaching in Newfoundland I recognised the extraordinary fatigue of living in constant wind.

After the holiday Caroline and I ceased to pride ourselves on still being able to enjoy childish things, unlike others of our age, such as rolling down sand-dunes and collecting and barbecuing mussels on the beach, and I acquired a would-be boyfriend, an

Australian. My mother decided I needed to return to the safety of an English boarding school, so I went 'home' to England to persevere through three years of boredom and confinement, kept going by the presence of an archaic library of books deemed suitable for young girls, whose keeper I eventually became.

In Communicado

I: Hello and welcome to *In Communicado*, the programme where give we tongue to what is new in the world of the word whichever way it is uttered. Tonight I have with me what is still a fairly unusual, though with the huge and exponential expansion in the production of fiction (who was it said the novel was dead?) likely to become more frequent occurrence, the mature first time novelist. Welcome Caroline Moir, author of *Jemillia Koblica*, which will be published on the fourth of April.

CM: Thank you.

I: I hope you didn't mind my mentioning your maturity. There are of course some novelists starting later out there –

CM: Daniel Defoe and Joseph Conrad to –

I: Yes ...but still you will agree that your number is far outweighed by young hopefuls –

CM: I am as hopeful as they are ...though a little more panic stricken about time...there's a clock in Leeds with Tempus Fugit on it and –

I: – which brings me back to my first question. You are rather older –

CM: – sixty –

I: n – so, when did you start writing?

CM: When I was writing poems to my father who was working in ... Argentina? Rome? One of the two.

I: Were they any good?

CM: No...but I suppose they showed an interest in words.

I: And then?

CM: When I was fourteen I wrote a prose poem that won a national competition– second prize – called *Speed* – I'd always wanted to be a fighter pilot ...Then I stopped writing – apart from essays and letters ...postcards...it's quite an art cramming a year's life onto a postcard.

I: Why did you stop writing?

CM: I didn't think I had anything to say, I couldn't write about my life, that would have been too narcissistic and I wasn't interested in anything else.

I: What made you take up writing fiction?

CM: I wanted to tell stories... and I was told at a workshop that I wasn't a poet...it was quite a relief.

I: *Jemillia Koblica* is about a clone. Where did you gain the expertise to embark on such a subject?

CM: I'm interested in the emotional effect of being a clone, not in the science.

I: But have you been influenced by Sci-Fi?

CM: I have hardly read any...my influences are, well I suppose they've changed over the years... it depends who I am reading.

I: Who did you read first?

CM: Dickens – that seemed to be all there was in the libraries in Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Then at fifteen I was in charge of this astonishing Edwardian collection of books belonging to my headmaster ...it was the school library. I read Mary Webb there. I also bought Durrell's Alexandria quartet for it, but the RE teacher took it away...someone told me she burnt it.

I: And more recently?

CM: I am deeply infatuated with Nabokov at the moment. I mourn that I can't see like him – 'folded shirts lying on their backs' – but I am very grateful to him for rescuing me from Hemingway.

I: What gave you the idea for this novel?

CM: Well, I'd been wondering why people felt they had a right to have children – you know getting sperm from dying husbands ... and then I wondered what would make you insist on having your own cloned baby...or rather I wondered what it would be like to be that child ...Ishiguro published a novel about it ...I didn't read it because I knew I had to write about the subject anyway.

I: A lot of people wonder what it's like to write a novel, particularly the first...

CM: Difficult...

I: Apart from that?

CM: I think the problem is that you have an idea and you sit down and all seems to flow smoothly for say the first three chapters. It did for me anyway. Then I was busy with reality. Jemillia was hanging about saying, 'get on with it, I want to meet my mother,' and I was saying with some self-congratulation, and ...spite...? 'You'll have to wait'. Then I got stuck. I didn't know how to develop my characters, I knew where the plot would end but I didn't know how to get it there, I didn't know how much of the back story I needed to write into the novel or how to do so. It wasn't writer's block so much, I was able to keep writing – Nabokov has a wonderful phrase about the biographer's writing in *Sebastian Knight* – the drivel coming from the 'impetus of a clicking typewriter'. That was me.

I: But something got you past this – impasse?

CM: Yes the programme, *Word*, you know the one that's a kind of writer's surgery, Paul Magrs was discussing just this... not knowing where to go. He said that when he ran into the problem it was always because he hadn't thought out the structure properly. Then he said he'd once written six thousand words of synopsis for his last novel. Six thousand words? I'd written two hundred and thought that was enough.

I: So?

CM: So I sat down and wrote out a chapter by chapter synopsis. And at the end of that, I thought, I know what's going to happen in the end now, and most of what happens in between, I'm not sure I'm really interested in writing the novel...

I: But you did, and here's the proof, so something must have changed your mind.

CM: I realised that it wasn't only the lack of structure in the plot that had caused this mess – it was an abortion, that's what it felt like. Writing isn't really like having baby, but there's a kind of a way you feel responsible towards your main character; I felt guilty about Jemillia. I felt I couldn't run away from her... also I finally realised the real problem was that I didn't know enough about her. I could see her; knew her job; could glimpse what she felt. I'd even written out an interview with her about her life and attitudes, but all the time I had been cobbling together bits here and bits there; they didn't necessarily belong to her. No wonder I'd felt like an impostor when I was trying to write about her, I was making her up as I went along. I'd been reading *Sebastian Knight* ...

I: Yes

CM: ...that's all about the writer being an impostor – the difference is that he is writing out of a thorough knowledge of his characters – they are all him himself – and trying to find a way to pass them off as someone else.

I: Are you writing about yourself in Jemillia Koblica?

CM: No – at least that's what I would have originally said; obviously her character is drawn from people I have known ... in a funny way women are clones you know... they have the same role in all societies.

I: And men don't?

CM: Um...

I: So although you didn't know your character, you felt responsible, you had to bring her to life? How did you actually manage that?

CM: Burgess says that books are written by people who put 'bottom to chair and pen to paper' ...something like that, so I put my bum on my seat and started again. I spent the first couple of weeks thinking about the main characters and what they liked doing and didn't like doing, where they lived what they really wanted out of life and that kind of thing...then I worked out what was going to happen in each chapter ...how I was going to manage the time in the novel – it starts in the present and then goes back to Jemillia's childhood before coming back to the present ...I suppose the thing I did most was to use my own experience and stop trying to make it up...the thing I learnt from Nabokov.

I: And the next novel?

CM: It's about a young bloke who goes to Patagonia...I don't know if it'll be set in the present or the past yet.

I: Quite a departure from using your own experience then?

CM: Oh I have some experience of Patagonia – and of blokes who leave home and never really return.

I: Caroline Moir, thank you for talking to us on *In Communicado*... and good luck to you and to Jemillia.

CM: Thank you.

A note on coincidence

Throughout the writing of *The Brockenspectre* and the accompanying thesis a number of coincidences occurred. While I was trying to decide which one out of the two novels I had ideas for I really wanted to write, I happened to pick up Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*. It had lain on my bookshelf, unread, for some time. The date I finally opened it was the date of the start of the novel, October 23rd, though 2008 rather than 1990. Miriam's decision to write about what she calls an imposter is a direct lift from my own experience, and was one of the factors in finding myself, at the start of writing, too close to my protagonist which resulted in me having to do a considerable amount of work to detach myself – particularly as I was allocating her part of my own autobiography.

Although I have never enjoyed Gothic fiction, the second coincidence took place when I became deeply interested in the way Hawthorne writes about the corruption of affection and intellectual passion, particularly in his short stories and the two novels cited and discussed in my thesis. While reading critically about him I discovered with a sense of shock that the two female protagonists of *The Marble Faun* are the fair, icy Hilda, and the dark, passionate Miriam. I deliberately didn't read the novel, but the discovery made me realise how much I have been influenced by those American Gothic novelists who are his descendants – in particular William Faulkner. This led me to understanding that the coincidence pointed out to me by a fellow student, that *Brockenspectre* features in *Frankenstein*, that huge figure in the modern appreciation of the Gothic, and my use of the Whitby of *Dracula* fame was maybe not entirely unpremeditated.

The penultimate coincidence was stumbling across *No Man's Land* by Graham Greene. The title seemed to chime with my thesis, but the discovery that it was set in the Harz mountains, and suffered from pre-publication media references to 'spectres' was accompanied now not by a feeling so much of shock as of the inevitable.

Finally, when searching for the source of Graham Greene's phrase 'the tyranny of plot' I came across it in his review of Dorothy Richardson's autobiographical *Pilgrimage*, with its connotations of the transcendental and journey. I found to my alarm that her heroine has the same name as mine, Miriam Henderson. Why Richardson named her that I do not know, but I know why I named my protagonist: Henderson after a girl from Argentina, and Miriam after Moses' sister, who may have failed, like Moses, to reach the Promised Land.

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